

The *Master* of Ragnarok & Blesser of *Einherjar*

BY SEIICHI TAKAYAMA
ILLUSTRATION: YUKISAN

20





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"Tsk. It seems
you still require
a little more
discipline."

"Yes, thank you,
mistress! Please
offer your
discipline to this
unworthy cur!"

The Master of Ragnarok & Blessed of Einherjar

20

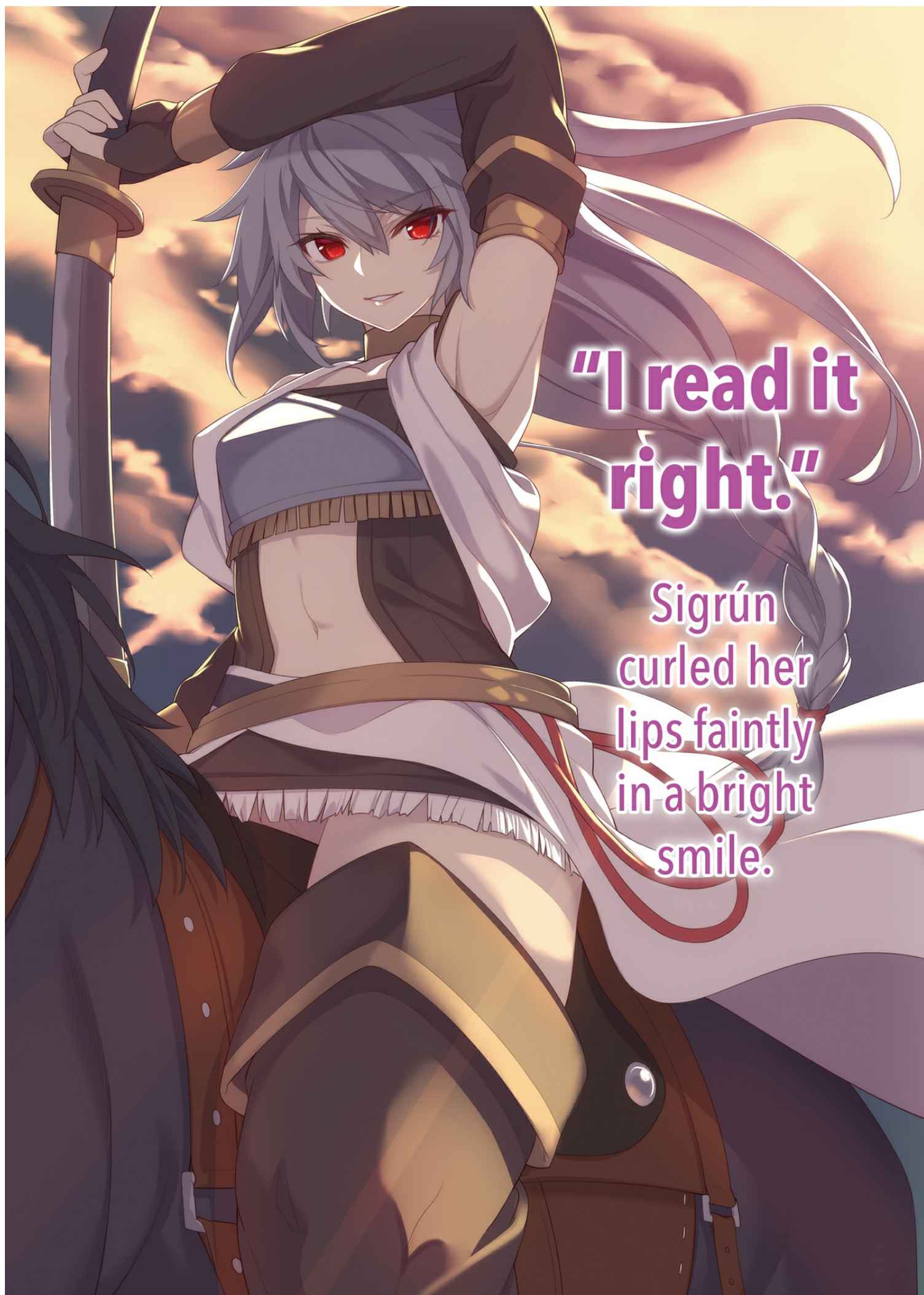
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**"Now's
the time!
Let fly!"**

Upon hearing
Kristina's signal,
Hveðrungr stood
up and waved his
hand.

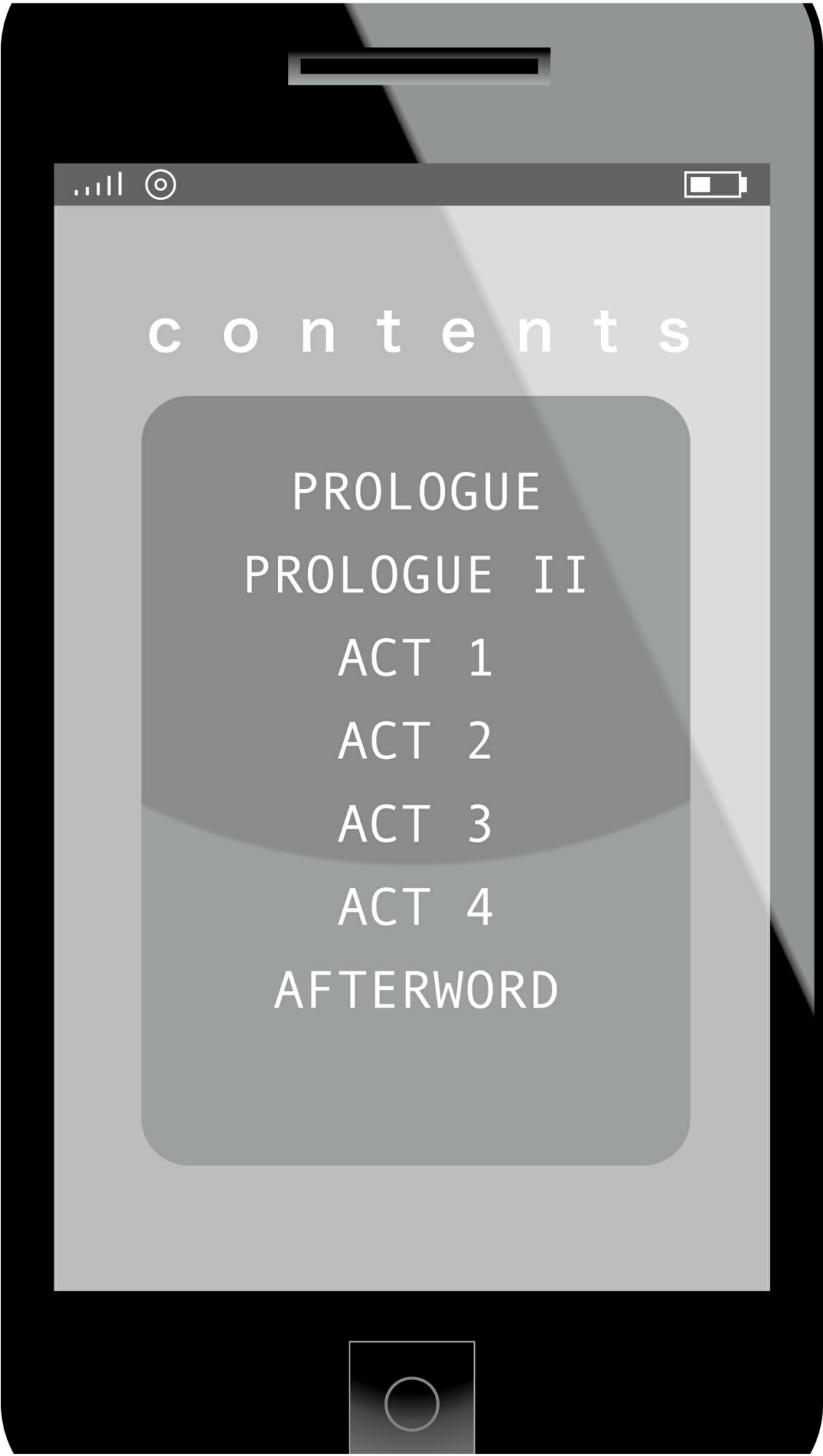
"What?!"





**"I read it
right."**

Sigrún
curled her
lips faintly
in a bright
smile.



c o n t e n t s

PROLOGUE
PROLOGUE II
ACT 1
ACT 2
ACT 3
ACT 4
AFTERWORD

Characters



Felicia

Yuuto's adjutant, and sworn younger sister. She is an Einherjar with the all-purpose rune, Skirnir, the Expressionless Servant.



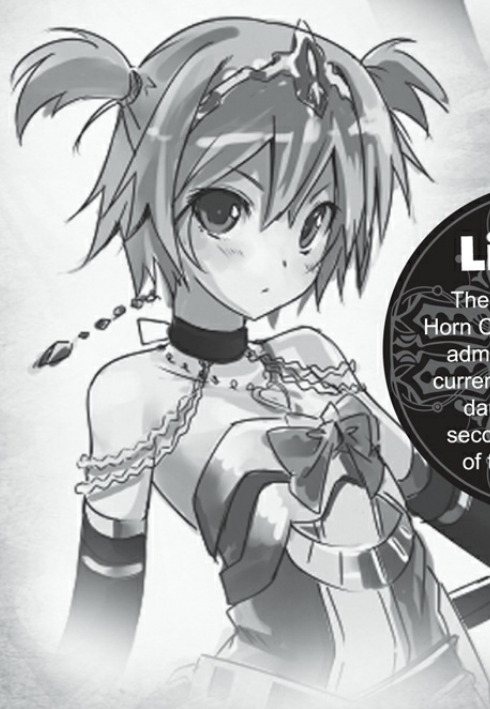
Sigrún

Yuuto's sworn daughter, a soldier and Einherjar of the rune Hati, Devourer of the Moon. She holds the title of Máhagarmr, given only to the Wolf Clan's strongest warrior.



Yuuto Suoh

A young man summoned to the world of Yggdrasil from the modern era. As the sovereign of his newly-created Steel Clan, he now rules over multiple subordinate clans as the reginarch, or "Great Lord."



Linnea

The patriarch of the Horn Clan and a talented administrator. She is currently Yuuto's sworn daughter and the second-in-command of the Steel Clan.



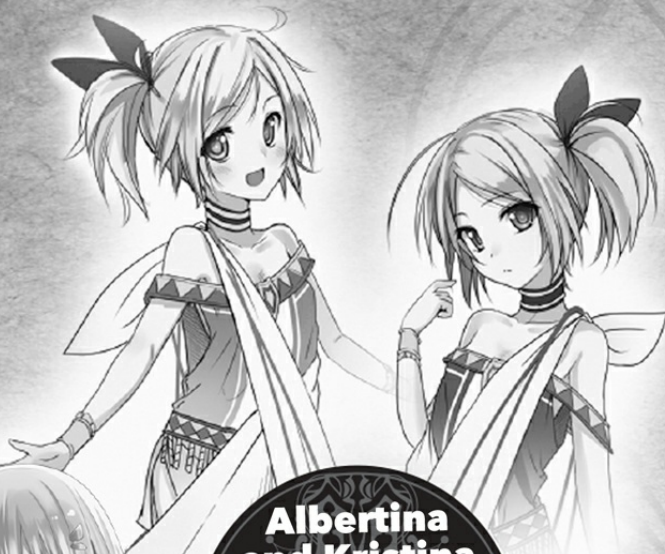
Ingrid

Yuuto's sworn daughter, and chief blacksmith of the workshop which produces weapons and other items for the Wolf Clan. She is an Einherjar with the rune Ivaldi, Birther of Blades.



Mitsuki Shimoya

Yuuto's soulmate and childhood friend. Committing to living her life with Yuuto, she became a resident of Yggdrasil through Felicia's summoning ritual.



Albertina and Kristina

Twin daughters of the Claw Clan Patriarch. Kris and Al for short. Kristina lives to tease her care-free sister Albertina.



Sigdrífa

The 13th Reigning Divine Empress of the Holy Asgarror Empire. An Einherjar with twin runes, she also bears an uncanny resemblance to Mitsuki.



Hveðrungr

An Einherjar with the rune Albiófr, Jester of a Thousand Illusions. Under the mask, he is Felicia's brother by birth, Loptr.



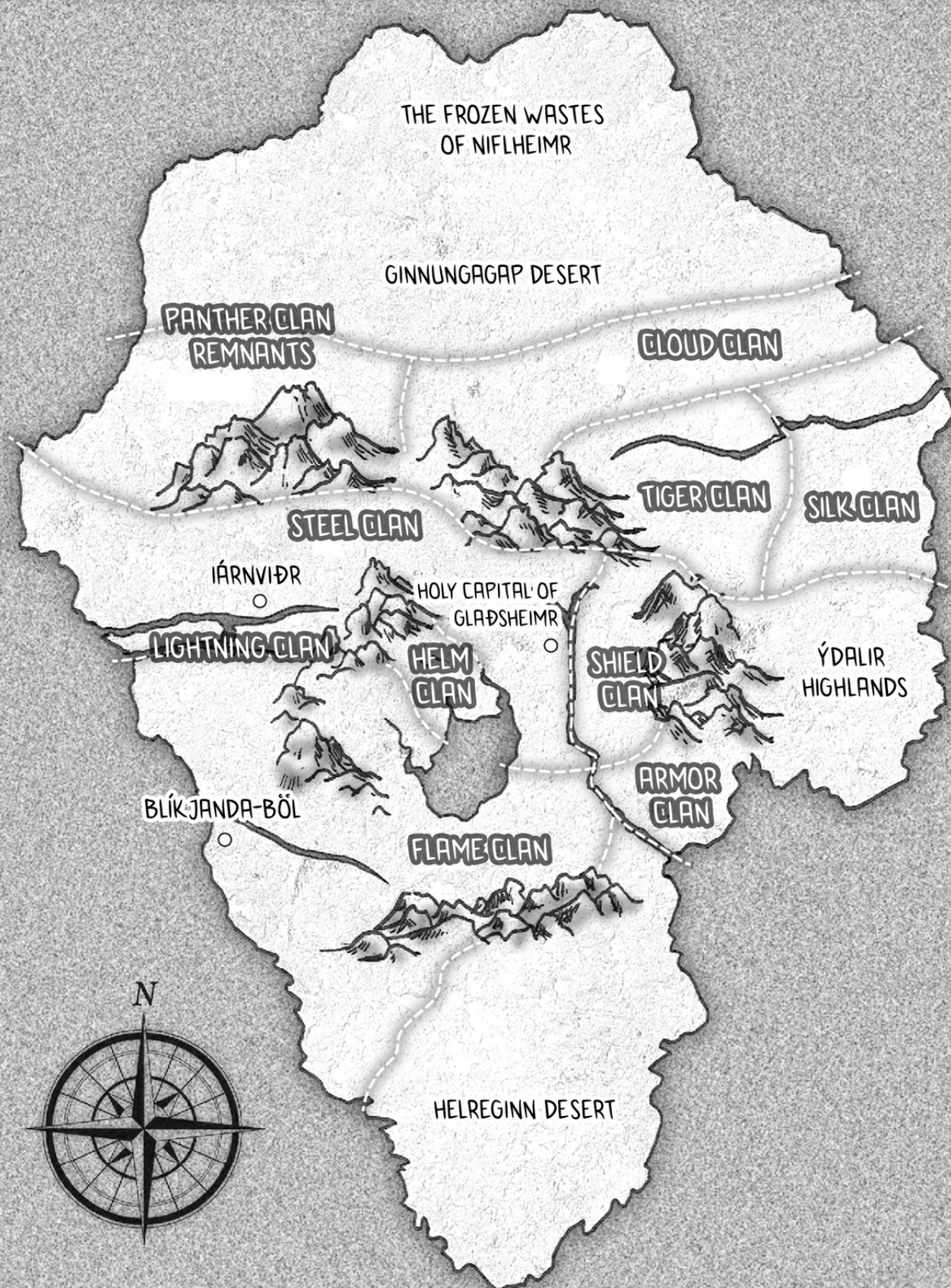
Oda Nobunaga

In Yggdrasil, he is patriarch of the Flame Clan, but everyone in Yuuto's modern world knows him as one of history's greatest figures—the legendary conqueror of Sengoku-era Japan.

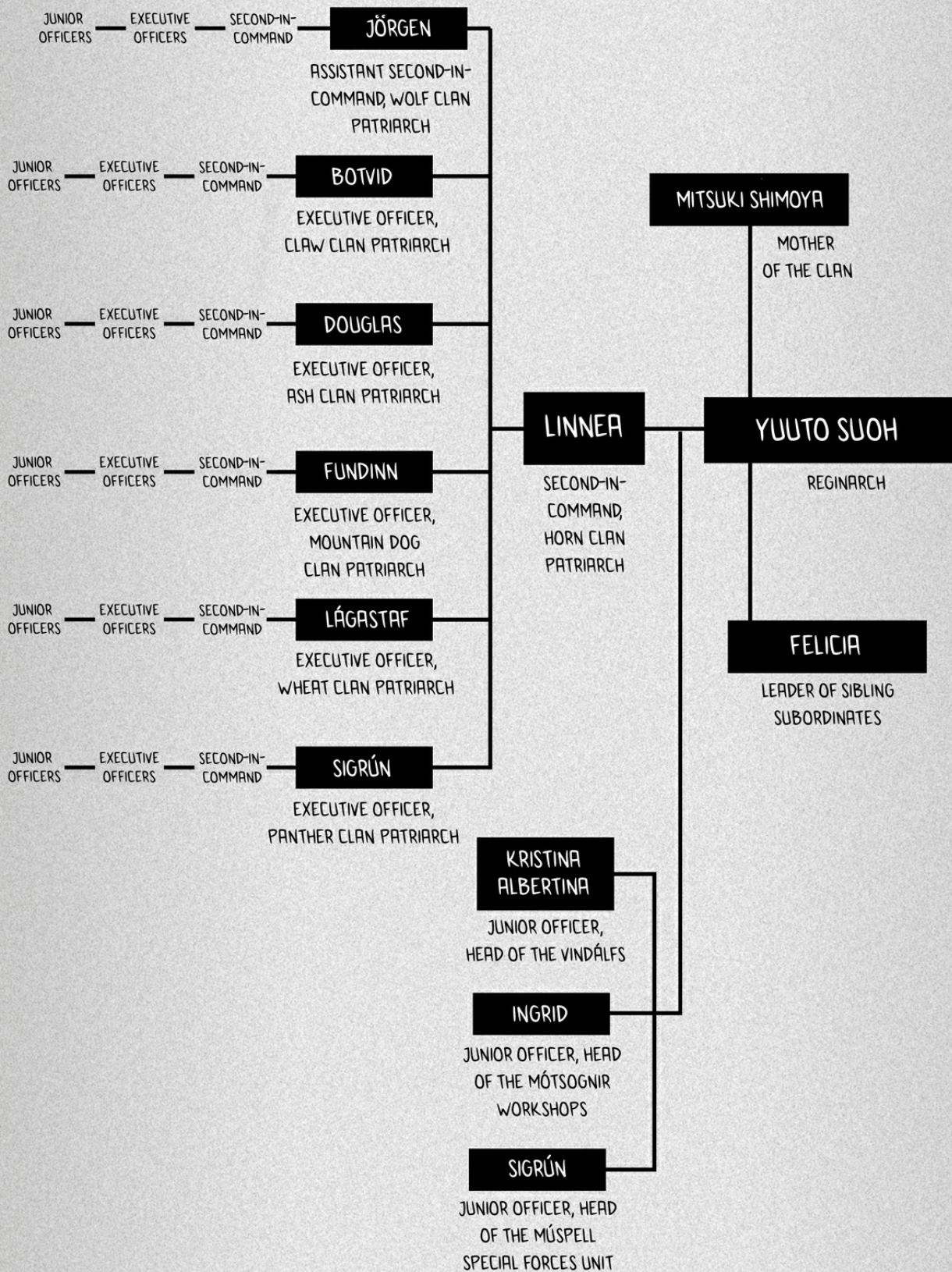


Fagrahvél

Patriarch of the Sword Clan who possesses the rune Gjallarhorn, the Call to War, and is Rifa's milk-sister.



HIERARCHY OF THE STEEL CLAN



PROLOGUE

The evening before the Second Battle of Glaðsheimr, Nobunaga and Ran were enjoying tea in Nobunaga's tent.

"Here you are, My Lord."

"Excellent. By the gods, there surely is nothing better than a good cup of tea after a spot of work."

Nobunaga drank down the barley tea served by Ran in a single gulp and let out a sigh of enjoyment. While he had been forced to withdraw in the spring in response to Yuuto's surprise tactics, he had now returned to Glaðsheimr. Having brought down Gjallarbrú Fortress and positioned his forces around the Holy Capital, his planned conquest of Yggdrasil was now within reach.

"If only we could get our hands on some real tea, it would be perfect," Nobunaga remarked as he held the teacup in his hand, gazing off into the distance, recalling the flavor of the green tea he had once enjoyed when he'd resided in Japan.

The tea plants necessary to make green tea didn't exist in Yggdrasil. Fortunately, barley existed to provide an alternative, but now that autumn was ending, the barley was past its prime, and the tea was a sad substitute in terms of flavor and aroma. Given that he had overcome numerous obstacles to get here, he longed for the sharp bitterness of green tea.

"Indeed. If we defeat the Steel Clan and invade the lands of the padres, no doubt we will acquire that as well."

"One would hope," Nobunaga replied to Ran's comment with a dismissive snort. While Ran's observation might have been true had they still found themselves in 16th century Japan, tea plants had yet to make their way to Europe in this era. That said, it wasn't as though Nobunaga himself knew that piece of historical trivia. What had prompted his reaction was whether or not his own body would last that long.

There was a constant discomfort in his chest, and lately, he had been prone to fits of bloody coughing. Although his beloved daughter Homura's seiðr kept the disease's progression at bay, even that would only buy him a few more years. He still had to rebuild after the recent disastrous earthquake. The time he had left wasn't enough to plan and execute a massive campaign into lands beyond the sea. The most he would be able to do in that remaining time would be to properly hand off the reins of the Flame Clan to Homura, stamp out any potential challengers, and make certain her rule would be a peaceful one.

"My Great Lord, does something trouble your thoughts...?" Ran asked, his brow furrowed in concern. Nobunaga was continually impressed by Ran's ability to read a room. Perhaps *he* was the one best suited for the role.

"Indeed it does. You recall that I asked you to care for Homura when I was gone, yes? I was thinking on that matter," Nobunaga replied.

"Yes, My Lord. It's a great responsibility, but rest assured that I will do everything in my power to make good on that trust."

"I expect you shall. So, Ran, have you considered who you will take as a new spouse?"

"A new spouse, My Lord?" Ran blinked in surprise at Nobunaga's question. It seemed the sudden shift in subject had caught him flat-footed.

"If I recall, your late wife died in the summer two years ago, yes? You're out of mourning now," Nobunaga responded flatly.

"I am. I believe there would be no issue. Whose daughter am I to marry, then?"

Ran spoke of his marriage prospects as though it were just another task set out for him by Nobunaga. To him, marriage was simply another part of governing. Nobunaga curled his lips into a teasing smile before he continued.

"Mine."

"Pardon...? W-Wait, you don't mean Lady Homura?!"

The comment had caught Ran completely by surprise. Given his usual ability to read the flow of a conversation, perhaps it should have been obvious, but it

seemed the proposal had been completely beyond anything he had dared imagine. Nobunaga nodded with smug satisfaction.

“That is exactly who I mean.”

“B-But there is far too great a gulf in our ages!” Ran said with a faint note of panic present in his voice. It was true. Ran was now over thirty, while Homura had just turned ten. Ran was literally old enough to be Homura’s father.

“I know full well. Homura’s a tricky girl to deal with. I can’t think of any other man who could possibly handle her.”

“Y-You trust me that much...?” Ran replied, tearing up as he spoke. It seemed he was intensely moved by Nobunaga’s remark.

“Precisely that.”

“Precisely what, My Lord?”

“Well, Ran, there are many who follow me, but only a handful who have given me their absolute loyalty,” Nobunaga said objectively with a tone of self-deprecation.

A part of him knew that such a circumstance was unavoidable. In order to conquer all under the heavens, Nobunaga had prioritized ability over all else in his retainers. However, those with the suitable level of ability to measure up to his standards had their own personality quirks, and almost all of them had hidden ambitions of their own. It was fine so long as Nobunaga himself held tightly onto their reins, but it was likely that they would begin acting in their own self-interests once he was out of the picture. He couldn’t leave his beloved daughter to men like that.

“More than anything, Ran, I think of you as my own son.”

“Ah?!”

“Not just you, but all of Yoshinari’s sons.”

“Y-You speak much too greatly of us, My Lord...”

“For such a son to marry my daughter—there is nothing more gratifying for a father.” Nobunaga allowed his usual facade to drop and smiled. It was a rare, gentle smile that he seldom showed, even in private.

“My Great Lord... There’s no way I can decline given how much trust you’ve shown me. While I have many failings, I will become Lady Homura’s husband and do my best to support her!”

“Good, I’m relying on you.”

“Yes, with all of my body and soul!”

“Don’t overthink it. Homura hasn’t come of age as a woman just yet. That’s still many years in the future.” Nobunaga briefly laughed in amusement, then the smile faded from his face and he took on an expression befitting of a conqueror. With the sentimentalities over, Nobunaga returned to the more pressing matter. “Before that can happen though, we first need to finish off the Steel Clan, or rather, we must deal with Suoh Yuuto.”

Yuuto’s very existence was the greatest threat to the future of the Flame Clan. He was too much of a monster for the young Homura. In fact, even if she were fully grown, she would likely struggle to put up a fight against him.

“I hear he’s still in his teens. Meaning that he’s only going to get better from here on out,” Nobunaga remarked.

“You believe he will continue to grow?” Ran said with a skeptical grimace.

“There’s the possibility that he simply peaked early, but I feel that he’s still a bit too forgiving. He certainly has room to grow in that regard. If he continues to hone his skills, he might very well become too much for even me to handle. Though that would be entertaining in and of itself.” Nobunaga chuckled softly at the thought.

He had spent his entire life engaged in war. At some point, a demon that yearned for bloodshed and conflict had made its home in his heart. That demon kept egging him on—it wanted to fight stronger enemies and needed greater challenges. That thirst for a challenge was the reason he had agreed to a nonaggression pact with Suoh Yuuto during their meeting in Stórk. He wanted to give the cub a chance to grow into a lion. However, Nobunaga was practically out of time.

“My Great Lord...” Ran furrowed his brow, his expression conflicted.

He had been Nobunaga’s subordinate for well over ten years. He knew

Nobunaga's eccentricities, and his need to indulge in them.



“Hah! I kid, I kid. I’m not so patient that I’d toy with my prey while the prospect of the total conquest of these lands is in plain sight. I fully intend to finish things with this battle,” Nobunaga replied, baring his fangs in a predatory grin.

What Ran didn’t hear, however, was the follow-up to that statement; something Nobunaga thought to himself and knew better than to say out loud. *“After all, if I let him go now, the chance to conquer these lands disappears with him...”*

PROLOGUE II

A year ago, the patriarch of the Armor Clan had come to pledge his loyalty to Suoh-Yuuto, the newly crowned þjóðann of the Holy Ásgarðr Empire.

“Allow me to inspect your goods,” Sigrún demanded.

“Oh, a moment!” the Armor Clan patriarch pleaded.

Sigrún ignored the pleas of the Armor Clan patriarch and uncorked the bottle. The smell that wafted out of the bottle forced her to recoil, covering her mouth with disgust.

“Urgh! What is this?!” Sigrún asked, glaring suspiciously at the Armor Clan patriarch. “You dared bring something like this as an offering to Father? Are you declaring war upon us?!”

“N-No, no! That’s not it all, Lady Sigrún!” The Armor Clan patriarch said in a panic, wildly shaking his head from side to side.

The patriarch’s panic was understandable. Even at this point, the Steel Clan already held control over the entirety of the Bifröst and Álfheimr regions, as well as northern Ásgarðr. By comparison, the Armor Clan, though one of the prestigious Arms and Armor Clans, was medium-sized and not even counted among the Ten Great Clans. There was no way that it would win a war with the Steel Clan.

“This is a very strange and rather interesting item that exists in our lands. I only brought it so that His Majesty could enjoy its unique properties.”

“Enjoy it, you say? Rún, bring that here,” Yuuto said, his curiosity piqued.

“Huh? But to bring you such a...”

“It’s fine. It’s not like it’s poison or anything,” Yuuto interjected. If that had been the case, they would have simply placed it into food, rather than bothering with such an elaborate and circuitous ploy.

“Very well,” Sigrún replied.

She made her distrust and hesitation clear as she brought the bottle to Yuuto. Taking the bottle from her hands, Yuuto opened it. An intense scent wafted out of the bottle. He understood why Sigrún had recoiled at it. It was certainly an unpleasant odor for people who weren't used to it, but to Yuuto, it brought back memories of home.

"This is known as rock water and..." the Armor Clan patriarch began to explain.

"No, you need not explain, I know of it."

"Indeed?! I'm impressed, Your Majesty! You truly are a font of knowledge."

"It's a smell that was pretty common back in my homeland," Yuuto said, chuckling softly as he did. Yes, it was a smell that was common in the modern world, and it wafted from a substance that he had been looking for but had given up on locating as he hadn't found any in his territories.

"Can you obtain a fair amount of this?"

"Huh? Well, yes. It bubbles out of the ground, so with enough time, we can procure quite a lot."

"I see. Then bring as much as you can gather. I'll trade you silver for it."

"T-Truly?!"

The Armor Clan patriarch's eyes went wide in surprise. To him, the rock water was probably just meant as a little curiosity, particularly as the Armor Clan, with abundant forests, had no particular use for it.

"Father, what are you going to use this for?!" Sigrún asked, clearly confused.

"Hm? Well, something to have just in case."

Yuuto let out a dry, self-deprecating laugh. A particular tactic had come to mind, one that, if executed, would create hell on earth. It would be best if he never had to actually use it, but he had no intention of hesitating if it ended up being necessary.

ACT 1

“Sieg lárn!”

“Sieg Reginarch!”

“Sieg Þjóðann!”

“Huzzah! Huzzah! Huzzah!”

Roars of victory rang out from a section of the Holy Capital of Glaðsheimr. The cheers were contagious, quickly spreading from unit to unit, growing in volume until they engulfed the entire city, and they echoed so loudly that they managed to reach the very walls of the Valaskjálf Palace at the center of the city.

“Phew, so far so good.” Yuuto let out a long breath and slumped in his seat as he heard the sheer joy in the cheers ringing out throughout the city. He had already received word from Kristina via radio that the first wave of the Flame Clan Army had retreated. Despite knowing everything was fine for now, he felt a surge of relief wash over him as he listened to the cheers.

“Indeed. Our victory in this first battle was completely decisive. Impressive as always, Big Brother.”

“Yeah, I’m glad it worked.” Yuuto returned the words of his adjutant, Felicia, with a tired note of relief.

He had held a powerful conviction that he could win the first battle. He had even stated as much to his subordinates. And in reality, the first wave of the Flame Clan Army, Vassarfall’s Third Division, had been dancing on Yuuto’s palm for the entirety of the engagement. In the end, the Steel Clan forces had completely overwhelmed their opponents in this initial battle. That said, it wasn’t going to get any easier from here.

Prior to this engagement, the Steel Clan Army had suffered two straight defeats against the Flame Clan Army in major battles, and the army hadn’t had time to recover from the shock of defeat. The soldiers had all been

demoralized, and a general gloom had permeated their ranks. He had temporarily invigorated the army's morale using Fagrahvél's rune Gjallarhorn, the Call to War, but using that ability was extremely draining to Fagrahvél, so she couldn't maintain it for long. If the battle had dragged on and the effects of the rune had worn off, the army's morale would have quickly collapsed, with soldiers deserting en masse, and the Steel Clan Army itself could have collapsed into chaos. The battle had been a race against time to secure victory before that could happen.

"Well, this gives us a fighting chance," Yuuto said and tightly gripped his hand into a fist. Victory was the quickest way to remove uncertainty and doubt in people. That was doubly true for such a clear-cut and overwhelming victory. The victory against the Flame Clan's vanguard had provided a huge boost to the morale of his army. No matter how clever his tactics and strategies were, without a motivated army, there was no way he could defeat Nobunaga. He had needed to win this first engagement at all costs, and he was relieved to have done this well.

"A fighting chaaaance? From myyyy vantaage point, you conducted the forces with suuuch skill that I couldn't help but staaare in admiration," Bára, the Sword Clan's tactician, said with her usual languid tone of voice. Yuuto chuckled and shrugged his shoulders.

"Heh, well, I'm glad to hear that sort of flattery from you, Bára, given your reputation as one of the three greatest tacticians in Yggdrasil."

"Noooo, no flattery at aaall. I meaaant every word. But really, even with a foorce like thiiiis, you think that we only staaaand a chaaaance of successsss?"

"Precisely. We're facing Nobunaga, after all. I'm sure he's going to come up with something."

Yuuto looked off toward the main body of Nobunaga's forces in the distance, his expression taut with tension. Yuuto was confident that the formation and tactics he had readied for the defense of Glaðsheimr were the best he was capable of producing. However, his opponent was a man who would find a way to overcome that. He had no idea what form Nobunaga's eventual victory would take, but he was certain that the man would come out on top in the end.

“Even so, I’ve still got plenty of cards up my sleeve,” Yuuto claimed confidently and gripped his hand into a tight fist.

Yuuto’s objective was to move all of his people to a new land. To accomplish that goal, he needed to land a heavy blow against the Flame Clan Army and stop their advance. If he lost here, the Steel Clan Army’s morale would be completely broken, and they certainly wouldn’t be able to bring themselves to resist against the Flame Clan. His back was against the wall. The battle that would decide the fate of Yggdrasil had now started in earnest.

“I see. The lad is as impressive as always, it would seem.” Having heard Vassarfall’s report, Nobunaga nodded and furrowed his brow in thought. Nobunaga had been convinced that Suoh Yuuto had something up his sleeve, but he had exceeded his expectations.

“Yes, he completely outclassed me. The fact that he was able to accurately track the positions of several dozens of his units spread out through this maze of a city and command them so precisely wasn’t the work of a man—it was almost divine. Furthermore, based on what I was able to gather from the sounds, there seem to be a number of underground tunnels as well. An enemy attack could come out of nowhere at any moment. I admit it sounds like an excuse on my part, My Lord, but I believed retreat was the best option...” Vassarfall said tensely as he lay prostrated before Nobunaga, and it was clear the man was nervous. Nobunaga was unforgiving when it came to failure. Even in the last ten years, numerous high-ranking retainers had been punished for failing to live up to his expectations. No matter how well that individual may have performed in the past, Nobunaga would mercilessly strip them of rank and wealth if he determined them to no longer be of use, and his vassals all feared his wrath for that reason. Vassarfall was no exception, and it seemed he was dreading the punishment that awaited him.

“No, I recognize what you did was for the best.” Nobunaga waved his hand casually and cut off the apologetic Vassarfall mid-sentence.

While his subordinates believed that Nobunaga’s trigger points for his rage were difficult to read, Nobunaga had clear standards in judging his subordinates. Did the subordinate in question avoid overconfidence, avoid

cutting corners, and put all of their effort into the endeavor? At the very least, so far as Nobunaga could tell, Vassarfall had made extensive preparations, put in all of his effort to accomplish his mission, and when he determined that accomplishing his mission was impossible, he had immediately made the decision to retreat, minimizing his losses and returning with a report on the enemy's tactics. He hadn't done anything worthy of punishment. If anything...

"You did lose, but winning and losing are simply a part of war. You understood your mission correctly and fulfilled the role you were given. While you weren't able to secure Suoh Yuuto's head, you still did well! You've served me well today!"

As he listened to Nobunaga's litany of praise, Vassarfall raised his head. Though, yes, he had fulfilled his role as the vanguard of the army, he had still been thoroughly routed. He certainly hadn't been expecting to be praised for that result.

"As a reward, you may have the Glass Goblet crafted by the Great Artisan Ingrid!"

"Wha?!"

Vassarfall's jaw fell open in shock. The other generals also began murmuring amongst themselves. The Flame Clan was a mighty clan that controlled half of Yggdrasil. It, of course, had countless treasures in its possession, but the Glass Goblet crafted by the Steel Clan's Great Artisan Ingrid was known as one of Nobunaga's favorite items. For him to give such an item to a losing general as a reward was unprecedented.

"T-Truly, my lord?!"

Even Vassarfall, the recipient, seemed unable to believe the news.

"Of course! I never go back on my word!" Nobunaga said confidently, without the slightest hesitation, and then glared at the other assembled generals.

"Listen well, you lot!" The sheer volume of his shout and the presence behind his voice sent a jolt through the air. The murmuring stopped in an instant, and silence engulfed the space. After making certain everyone had fallen silent, Nobunaga continued in a softer voice. "This battle is the pivotal engagement

which will determine whether it is us, the Flame Clan, or the Steel Clan that controls all of Yggdrasil!”

Upon hearing what Nobunaga had to say, the various generals all nodded in agreement. They were all in their positions because of their ability—they all understood what was at stake in this battle.

“So, for precisely that reason. I have no intention of stinting when it comes to rewards. Any who produce meaningful results shall get whatever they wish for! Land, titles, treasures, anything! I shall give it to you in my name!”

At Nobunaga’s declaration, the generals all sucked in a breath and stared wide-eyed. The fact that he had given his favorite Glass Goblet to Vassarfall provided ample evidence that Nobunaga meant every word. Even a loss could yield a great treasure. Then what lay waiting for those who contributed to the victory? Their expectations swelled.

“Make certain that every soldier in our army is aware of this! I look forward to watching you fight! This battle will be ours!”

“Yes, My Lord!”

The generals answered in unison with a predatory hunger in their eyes. The fact that Vassarfall, one of the greatest generals in the Flame Clan Army, had suffered an overwhelming defeat seemed like a minor, inconsequential result to those assembled before Nobunaga. His declaration had completely driven the shock of Vassarfall’s defeat from their minds.

“Heh, that didn’t cost much.”

Nobunaga smiled smugly at the reaction of his subordinates. The truth was that Nobunaga wasn’t particularly attached to the Glass Goblet. Of course, it was a wonderful piece of artistry; a goblet that was a level, no, two or three levels above other glass objects, but that was only among the glass objects of Yggdrasil. Compared to the treasures that had been given to him by the western merchants during his time in Japan, it was still unrefined and raw. Based upon the katana that he had given to Shiba, it was clear that this Ingrid was an artisan of remarkable skill, but no matter how great of a talent she was, she wasn’t able to match three thousand years of evolution and refinement in glassware.

Then why had he praised the goblet and displayed it to his subordinates as though it were his most treasured item? The answer was simple: he had simply adapted the method he had used to educate and retain his vassals in Japan. He had spread tea ceremonies among the high-ranking samurai; he had emphasized the importance of cultural items and made possession of teaware masterpieces a mark of status and trust.

That had transformed the ceramic masterpieces into treasures that were valued as highly as land and precious metals. Further, by having them learn the practices of the tea ceremonies, he had managed to educate his vassals, who were all unrefined rural samurai from Owari, in the finer points of etiquette and manners. It had allowed him to kill two birds with one stone.

While Nobunaga himself had never put a name to this policy, his successor Toyotomi Hideyoshi had continued the policy and called it Ochanoyu Goseido. This time, Nobunaga had simply used Ingrid's glass goblet instead of a teacup. The goblet had originally been a gift from the Steel Clan, meaning it had effectively been free. If that was all it cost him to remove the shock of defeat from his generals, while giving him a visible carrot to dangle in front of all of his men and raise their morale, then it was a cheap price to pay indeed.

The reason he had made a show of valuing it so much to this point had all been to set it up as a piece to use in a situation of this sort. Nobunaga always made certain he had countless contingencies for emergencies. Just being a good warlord wasn't enough to win and survive during the Warring States Period. This ability to prepare and be ready for any unexpected development was what had made Nobunaga a victor and conqueror in that unpredictable world.

"What do you intend to do, My Great Lord? Based on the information Vassarfall has shared with us, it would seem the enemy's scheme will be quite bothersome to deal with," Ran asked Nobunaga once the council of war had completed and no one else was left in earshot.

Nobunaga, as patriarch, would determine the overall strategy of the Flame Clan Army, along with his preferred tactics and policies, but it was Ran, the Second, who was responsible for communicating those orders to the commanders of each unit and ensuring that Nobunaga's plan was executed as intended. It was a relatively straightforward role if the enemy was one that

could be easily dispatched, but the enemy's response had easily overwhelmed even Vassarfall, Master of Advance and Retreat.

The Flame Clan may have enjoyed numerical superiority, but if they attempted to force their way through the Steel Clan's defenses, it was clear they would take enormous losses. There was no reason to expect Nobunaga not to have a suitable response to dealing with the enemy's dispositions.

"Indeed. His plan does seem like it'll be something of a headache. It brings to mind the Stone Sentinel Maze of Zhuge Liang," Nobunaga muttered as he rested his chin on his hand.

"The scheme employed by Zhuge Liang in *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*? Where he readied a maze made up of stones, and where any force that wandered in would soon find themselves experiencing strange events, eventually dooming them to be lost within..."

Ran immediately understood Nobunaga's reference. During the Warring States Period, all boys of samurai birth were expected to study Chinese history. Ran was a son of Mori Yoshinari, an important retainer of Nobunaga, and had served as Nobunaga's squire to prepare him for the important role he would be fulfilling in his future. This tale had been included in the list of subjects he had been educated in.

"Precisely that. The two schemes share quite the resemblance, do they not?"

"Now that you mention it, yes..." Ran nodded in agreement.

Glaðsheimr had countless adobe construction houses both large and small, and they were arranged in a web that made the city into a veritable maze of brick. Vassarfall's Third Division had gotten lost in that maze, and its soldiers had struggled to even find their way back to the main streets of the city. It was exactly the situation that had faced Lu Xun in Zhuge Liang's Stone Sentinel Maze.

"Heh... To think I'd get the chance to face such a legendary trap. I never would have dreamed I'd be in this position. One of the benefits of living a long life, I suppose."

"I had always believed it was simply something made up for the sake of the

story.”

“Indeed. Well, whether it’s the real deal or simply something that faintly resembles it is an open question,” Nobunaga replied, chuckling as he scratched at his stubble.

Nobunaga enjoyed facing challenges that no one else had ever been able to overcome. As attested by Takenaka Hanbei’s nickname as the ‘Modern Zhuge Liang,’ Zhuge Liang was recognized as one of the greatest generals in history even in Japan. Nobunaga knew he shouldn’t be enjoying this situation as much as he was, but the prospect of dealing with the legendary scheme concocted by one of history’s greatest minds was stimulating.

“If it’s real, then it should be based on the Eight Open Gates Formation. Supposing that is the case, it can be defeated with the use of the Eight Locked Gates Formation, can it not?” Ran asked as he rubbed his chin in thought.

“Oh? Continue,” Nobunaga replied, his interest piqued.

“Yes, My Lord. The Eight Locked Gates Formation is a formation that was employed by Cao Ren in *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*. As the name implies, there are eight entrances, of which the Wound, Shock, and Rest Gates leave the entering army at a disadvantage and, more concerningly, the Death and Obstacle Gates result in total destruction. The entrances that offer opportunities for victory are the Birth, Vista, and Open Gates.”

As he listened to Ran’s explanation, Nobunaga nodded briefly and turned his gaze to the map spread out in front of him. Glaðsheimr, the fortress city, had been designed with gates on the north, south, east, and western sides of the city. However, with the city walls in ruins after the recent earthquake, it was now possible to enter from any direction.

“The city’s actual gates are probably all Death Gates,” Nobunaga remarked and snorted with displeasure.

The main gates each led into a large street that linked the gate to Valaskjálf Palace, which made it possible to advance upon the palace with a large force. However, the streets themselves were lined with obstacles, meaning the enemy was able to set up ambushes at their leisure. The thought of enemy forces hitting his exposed flanks with his army stretched along those major streets

sent a shiver up Nobunaga's spine.

"Still, even if we entered through the various breaks in the wall, the only thing that awaits us beyond is an endless warren of maze-like alleys," Ran explained.

"Meaning the Steel Clan has the advantage in terms of terrain..." Nobunaga remarked.

"If that were all it was, we'd have plenty of options. When assaulting any fortified structure, be it a small keep or a sprawling city, the defenders always hold the advantage, after all. We've dealt with this countless times to this point," Ran responded.

Given that fortresses were designed for defense, it went without saying that they were designed in such a way as to give a defending force the maximum possible advantage. There were plenty of castles in Japan that had been laid out like labyrinths within. They had been a headache to bring down, but it was precisely because he had conquered every one of them that Nobunaga had gotten within a step of reunifying the country.

"The threat this time is the almost supernatural coordination between the Steel Clan's forces," Nobunaga stated and grunted, furrowing his brow in thought soon after.

Vassarfall had indicated that several dozen units had been coordinating their movements, simultaneously striking from multiple sides. After they had struck, the same units had then withdrawn in good order. The fighting in the labyrinth that had once been the Holy Capital should have been a string of small skirmishes scattered across the city. It was impossible to work out all of the possible responses and contingencies ahead of time.

"Suoh Yuuto has devised some method to allow him to give orders to his units all at once. That I'm certain of," Nobunaga said flatly after weighing the possibilities.

Obviously, human beings didn't have long-range telepathy or anything similarly ridiculous. Generally speaking, orders were communicated to units using messengers. Because of this, there was always a time lag between sending those orders and the arrival of those orders to their respective units. However, based on all of the reports Nobunaga had received regarding

Vassarfall's recent battle, there was no such lag for the Steel Clan's forces. At the very least, that was the only conclusion he could draw based on the information available to him. Which meant there was only one possible answer.

"Ah?! But that's impossible..." Ran's eyes went wide with shock. A 21st-century human being, used to communicating with smartphones, might not consider it outlandish, but to Ran, who had been born many centuries prior, the ability to communicate instantly over long distances may as well have been a divine miracle. It was difficult for people to imagine things that were too far outside of the accepted wisdom of their times, and as such, they often subconsciously removed outlandish possibilities from their thought processes. It was a natural, almost biological response to make sure they weren't overwhelmed with thoughts of absurd and improbable events. Nobunaga, however, was easily able to set aside his preconceptions when necessary.

"Impossible, is it? Then how else do you explain the Steel Clan's remarkable coordination?" Nobunaga commented.

"That... I..." Ran was at a loss for words.

"No matter how ludicrous it might seem, what we see happening with our own eyes is the reality we need to face," Nobunaga stated calmly.

One of Nobunaga's greatest abilities was his extreme pragmatism. To him, the outcomes and results were what was correct—if they so happened to go against established knowledge or conventional wisdom, then he would always consider those concepts to be flawed without hesitation. While it sounded simple enough, it was an extremely remarkable way of looking at the world. Humans were always constrained by their own knowledge and preconceptions. Even the smartest people who couldn't escape that constraint were, in the end, simply slightly smarter but ordinary people. The true geniuses were those who could question and reject what everyone else accepted as normal.

"You're right. We're in Yggdrasil. The conventional wisdom of the Land of the Rising Sun doesn't apply here. I know this in my mind, but..." Ran let out a sigh of resignation. Even if his heart didn't want to accept it, the facts had forced him to admit that Nobunaga was right. "If you say so, My Great Lord, then that must be the case."

“You seem quite fond of that particular choice of words, Ran.”

“As a mere retainer, I can’t hope to match your wisdom, My Great Lord.”

“Is that so?” Nobunaga let out a long sigh. It wasn’t that he disliked the fact that Ran knew his place, but there was a part of him that felt Ran was too deferential to him. It was fine during peacetime, but at times like this, Nobunaga couldn’t help but wish for a bit more initiative.

“So, how will we attack? In a field battle, we can push through using just numbers and momentum, but if we’re mostly going to be engaging in small skirmishes in constrained spaces, then...”

“If we charge in without a plan, we’ll end up like Vassarfall and have our forces utterly destroyed.”

Ran had been particular in his phrasing, but Nobunaga bluntly spelled out the results. While it was a Japanese cultural trait to avoid overtly stating uncomfortable facts, it wasn’t as though any sort of tact or ambiguity would change them. Though there were times when simply leaving such unpleasant realities unaddressed could solve matters, more often than not, that sort of neglect made the situation worse. For that reason, Nobunaga believed it was better to simply lay out the problem in the open and tackle it head on. At the very least, facing the problem directly increased the chances of successfully solving it.

“If we can’t brute force it, then we need to be a bit more subtle... That said, our usual methods probably won’t work so well here,” Nobunaga stated flatly.

Those “usual methods” were something Nobunaga favored, and which he had made use of during his first attack on Glaðsheimr: surrounding an enemy fortress with several siege castles and slowly but surely closing the noose around the enemy’s neck.

“Pardon? I believe that approach was relatively effective when we last used it.”

Ran blinked in surprise. Nobunaga’s siege castle strategy was a surefire tactic that had helped Nobunaga bring down countless fortresses in Japan. Indeed, the siege castles they had constructed around Glaðsheimr had isolated it from

the rest of the Steel Clan's territories. They were in the same location, so Ran wasn't certain why it wouldn't work a second time.

"The most important part of any good tactic is to do the things your enemy doesn't want you to do to them. There's no reason for us to do exactly what the enemy wants."

"What do you mean by that?" Ran asked in apparent confusion.

"They want us to waste time," Nobunaga replied.

Nobunaga was acutely aware of Yuuto's goals. It wasn't particularly hard to be so, honestly. The Steel Clan was trying to abandon Yggdrasil and relocate to a new land to the east. Gjallarbrú Fortress had completely abandoned any pretense of being a long-term emplacement and had no entrance or exits. It had been designed solely to stop the Flame Clan in its tracks.

"The Steel Clan's aim is to delay us until they've finished moving their people. How admirable for the ruler himself to be a shield for his subjects," Nobunaga continued.

In contrast to his words Nobunaga snorted dismissively. While it was true that rulers gathered taxes for the purposes of protecting their subjects from external enemies, that was rarely true in practice. There were plenty of rulers who viewed the lives of their subjects as just another resource, one to be spent for the sake of their country if the situation called for it. After all, a few lives were a small price to pay for the sake of results, were they not?

Nobunaga believed that the ability to be ruthless and calculating with the lives of one's subjects was one of the qualities required of a ruler. Without that ability to look at matters objectively and avoid being influenced by emotion, a ruler was unable to make the rational decisions necessary to run a country. A ruler that went out of their way to be liked by their people was likely to lose sight of the bigger picture and end up leading their country to ruin in the process. Such was the difficult balance that a ruler had to strike.

"I understand... If we were to construct several siege castles, even simple ones would take at least a month to build."

"Exactly. That's more than enough time for most of the migrations to finish.

After that, all he'd have to do is use an Arrowhead or Fish Scale Formation to force his way through the weakest part of the encirclement," Nobunaga explained.

Both of the aforementioned formations were well suited to frontal assaults. Had the walls of Glaðsheimr been intact, Nobunaga would have been able to concentrate his forces at the gates where the Steel Clan Army would emerge, but with the walls of the city in ruins, it was impossible to tell where they would make their exit. Realistically, it was impossible to prevent the Steel Clan Army from escaping the city.

"The world at large would still consider that a great victory for our cause, but I suppose it would be rather unsatisfying for you, My Great Lord."

"Of course. I don't want a child less than half my age essentially handing Yggdrasil over to me."

To Nobunaga, the only conquest that counted was one that he won by his own hand. While he had been born as the oldest son of Oda Nobuhide, the Lord Protector of Owari Province, his eccentricity as a youth had made most of the major Oda Clan retainers such as Shibata Katsuie back his brother, Oda Nobuyuki, to succeed Nobuhide. Nobunaga had only become Lord of Owari after defeating those forces in war. In both Japan and Yggdrasil, Nobunaga had fought his way to the top with his own strength. He was proud of that fact. There was nothing attractive about coming this far only to have his rival simply forfeit the battle.

"I expected as much. But, that brings us back to our initial question. How do we proceed? If we try to force the issue in our haste, that would be self-defeating," Ran asked.

"It certainly would..." Nobunaga replied and gazed up at the sky with a heavy sigh. No matter how great his ambitions and aims, if there was no way to make them a reality, then they were little more than empty fantasies. The simple fact was that the combination of the terrain advantage provided by the maze-like city ruins and the rapid coordination was extremely lethal. Even Nobunaga, the genius of the Warring States Period, had never seen nor dealt with a tactic of this sort. He couldn't even begin to think of an appropriate response.

“Gah... This is quite a headache. If we were in the Land of the Rising Sun, we could simply set fire to the city,” Nobunaga stated. Pillaging and burning the enemy castle’s surrounding city was a basic tactic in warfare. Nobunaga had himself burned down the city of Kiyosu, which would later become his clan’s capital, in his very first battle. That had been the norm in Warring States Period Japan.

He had attempted the same tactic several times against enemy clans here in Yggdrasil, but it had never produced much in the way of results against Yggdrasil’s houses, which were much more resistant to fire thanks to their adobe construction. They were far harder to burn down than the primarily wooden buildings that made up the bulk of Japan’s cities. Furthermore, the Holy Capital used fired brick both for aesthetic and safety purposes. Fire wouldn’t do much to the city’s buildings.

“Actually, something just came to me...” Nobunaga rubbed at his chin as a thought occurred to him. Setting fire to cities was meant to be both a psychological attack aimed at creating resentment toward the ruler among the city’s subjects, as well as a method to destroy any defensive facilities. Since Glaðsheimr was now abandoned, what he wanted to achieve was the latter. If he could get rid of the troublesome maze around the palace, he had plenty of options up his sleeve.

“Is there something else that can serve the same purpose?”

Glaðsheimr was a fortification like none that Nobunaga had encountered in his life. It was a completely different type of obstacle, a fact that had to be true of his opponent as well. Perhaps there was an opening to be exploited there.

“Ah!” Nobunaga was struck by a revelation at that moment, and his lips curled into a playful smile. “Ran! Get the army ready to move!”

“Heh, you let your guard down, Yuuto,” said Hveðrungr, the man in the eerie mask, as a smug smile crept across his features.

He had once been known as Loptr, and when he had lost the position of patriarch of the Wolf Clan, he had been struck with a mad thirst for revenge against his former protégé. However, the two had since reconciled, and he was

now one of Yuuto's subordinates, or at least that should have been the case...

"Grr..." Yuuto bit down on his lower lip.

How? How did things end up like this?! He couldn't come up with an answer. All he knew was that he was now completely cornered.

"It's over," Hveðrungr stated confidently.

"No! Not yet! I can still...!" Yuuto unleashed a desperate attempt at victory.

"Well within expectations," Hveðrungr said casually and applied the coup de grâce...atop the shogi board, that is.

"Checkmate."

"Gaaaah! I lost again!" Yuuto ruffled his hair angrily and let out a shriek of frustration.



“Heh, this is quite an enjoyable little game!” Hveðrungr rolled the pieces in his palm and laughed with satisfaction. His pleasure was understandable, he had now won five straight matches against Yuuto.

“Dammit. I’d never lost in an even match until now,” Yuuto said, pouting as he gazed down at the board. The pieces hadn’t moved, and he was still mated. “I can’t believe I lost to a guy who learned the rules three days ago... My pride’s in tatters...”

In a siege, the defenders generally had little to do if the enemy made no efforts to attack. Constantly being on alert was psychologically exhausting and made it difficult to make accurate judgments in an emergency. For that reason, Yuuto had suggested shogi to Hveðrungr as a way of keeping himself distracted from needlessly overthinking things.

At first, Yuuto had been able to beat Hveðrungr even with the handicap of no rooks or bishops, but unfortunately for him, Hveðrungr had taken to the game like a fish to water, quickly equaling Yuuto’s skill. Now on day three, he had totally outclassed him, even though Yuuto had been playing the game regularly since his arrival on Yggdrasil four years ago. While he knew that Hveðrungr was sharper than he was, he still found it difficult to accept that a man who had learned the rules a mere three days earlier had surpassed him.

“Well, of course, I stole all of your tactics, after all,” Hveðrungr chortled smugly.

Shogi, like chess, had many accepted tactics and movements that had been established by generations of players. Even a moderately experienced player who employed them should have been invincible against an amateur who had just learned the rules. However, Hveðrungr wasn’t some average amateur. Once Yuuto had employed those tactics against him several times, he began to come up with counters by copying the tactics, and then further refining them in his own gameplay.

“Still such a cheat ability...” Yuuto muttered with a sigh.

Hveðrungr’s rune, *Alþiófr*, the Jester of a Thousand Illusions, allowed him to copy others’ techniques and make them his own. The foundation of its power was his remarkable observational skills. Because of those, he was always

capable of fully leveraging vulnerabilities he found in his opponents, and Hveðrungr was also able to refine and adapt the techniques that he stole. It was a troublesome ability to face off against, as it made Hveðrungr better the more someone faced him.

“Hrmph, you’re one to talk. Even with this shogi, I’m sure you’ve got one or two more moves left up your sleeve you keep for emergencies, no?”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” Yuuto replied in an attempt to deflect the comment. It was true that there were several patterns he had yet to employ against Hveðrungr, but it wasn’t as though he had been keeping them in reserve; it was simply that he had been too busy with work to truly master their use.

“You’re always that way. It’s true that if we fight ten times, I’ll win nine times out of ten. But if this were an actual fight with your life on the line, then you’ll use the one hand you kept up your sleeve and do whatever you need to do to win the one match that matters,” Hveðrungr spat out rather sourly, likely referring to Yuuto’s knowledge and technologies from the 21st century. It was certainly true that every one of them had been far beyond the norms of this era and were practically impossible to cope with when they’d first appeared. In Yuuto’s mind, the fact that Hveðrungr had still somehow managed to adapt made him more of a monster than himself, but he held his tongue, as he knew it would only be taken as mockery.

“What did you call it? Operation Concrete Jungle? Watching it sent a shiver up my spine.” While the mask made his expression difficult to read, Hveðrungr’s remark was followed by a thoroughly displeased sigh. Perhaps he imagined what it must have been like for the enemy commander.

Yuuto himself knew that this particular tactic—one that had been inspired by reading about the Vietnam War—was a particularly nasty one to deal with. The combination of the maze-like streets of Glaðsheimr and the use of radios to convey information and orders in real-time was a marriage made in heaven. Then there was the additional bonus of Yuuto’s Einherjar abilities, Hervör, Guardian of the Host, and Herfjötur, Fetter of the Host. It all added up to an overwhelming advantage for the Steel Clan, which was why Yuuto had been certain of victory in the initial fighting.

“So, how would you deal with it, brother?” Yuuto asked as he placed the pieces back on the board. As could be seen in his ability with shogi, Hveðrungr’s powers of observation and his adaptability were head and shoulders above the norm. Yuuto was extremely curious about how Hveðrungr would handle this situation. It would provide a useful reference if Nobunaga employed a similar response.

“In my case, I’d commit entirely to an encirclement,” Hveðrungr replied without a moment’s hesitation. Apparently, the answer was just that obvious to him. “Even if there’s a jewel within a burning fire, there’s no reason to stick your hand into the fire to get it. The first thing to be done is to put out that fire. If there’s enough silver and materials available, I’d use those siege castles the Flame Clan used last time, but... Tch, looks like that’s the wrong answer, huh.”

“What?” Yuuto blinked his eyes in surprise at Hveðrungr’s sudden bitter click of the tongue.

“That’s the response you’re looking for. It’s written all over your face.”

“Huh, seriously? Guess I’ve let my guard down.”

After reconciling with Yuuto, Hveðrungr hadn’t bothered to suck up to him, and, if anything, had gotten more acerbic with time, but Yuuto found that aspect of their friendship comfortable and tended to let his guard down around him. Felicia was often quick to warn Yuuto to be careful, telling him that Hveðrungr might very well turn on him again at any moment. A quick glance in her direction indicated she still felt that way, as she let out an exasperated sigh. For his part, Yuuto couldn’t help but sympathize with Hveðrungr for being regarded with such suspicion by his own sister.

“So you admit it, do you? Hrmph. So, the plan I proposed would indeed be exactly what you wanted to happen,” Hveðrungr said with a snort of displeasure. Yuuto shrugged his shoulders mildly.

“It’s what I would want, but it’s not the wrong answer either. If anything, it’s the best possible answer,” Yuuto replied.

“Say what?” Hveðrungr asked incredulously, his tone clearly suggesting there was nothing ideal about doing exactly what the enemy wanted one to do. Hveðrungr’s skepticism aside, it was, in fact, the best possible outcome for

Yuuto.

In the mind of someone from the 21st century like Yuuto, war was part of diplomacy. The best outcome of any diplomatic endeavor was to create a win-win situation for all parties involved. The siege castle tactic would give both sides what they were looking for, with the Steel Clan getting the time they needed to prepare the massive operation of moving its people out of Yggdrasil, while Nobunaga and the Flame Clan would gain control of Glaðsheimr and Yggdrasil itself with minimal losses. The problem, however, was...

Before he could complete that thought, the radio transceiver at Yuuto's side suddenly crackled to life with static. He immediately picked it up.

"Father, the Flame Clan Army has resumed its advance on Glaðsheimr!"

"Figures..."

The best Yuuto could do was let out a dry laugh as Kristina's voice came over the radio. Nobunaga never moved the way he wanted him to.

"So, what's he up to this time?" Yuuto murmured tensely, setting down his radio in front of him.

He was facing Oda Nobunaga—there was no way such an experienced opponent would charge into the city without a plan. Nobunaga had surely heard from Vassarfall concerning how the Steel Clan Army had been arrayed within the city. Given that the man never moved until he had prepared the ground for his own victory, the fact that he was attacking despite that knowledge meant Nobunaga had already come up with a workable attack plan.

"How long is he going to take...?" Yuuto impatiently drummed his fingers against his knee. It hadn't actually been more than twenty minutes since he had received Kristina's report that the Flame Clan had resumed its advance. Given that walking was the basic mode of transportation in Yggdrasil, it would take them a while to reach their desired position. There was no use in working himself into a panicked frenzy while he waited, but his anxiety was understandable. Knowledge of how the enemy was going to act, no matter how bad the situation might be, at least was certainty about what needed to be dealt with. The most psychologically taxing situation was not knowing what was

coming. The radio returned to life with a burst of static.

“Father!”

“What’s the situation?” Yuuto asked directly, anxiety gnawing at him. The follow-up report was coming far too quickly after the initial report of the enemy’s movement.

“Cannons! The Flame Clan Army has brought out the cannons they used at Gjallarbrú to the front. I count at least twenty of them!”

“Dammit! He’s already come up with the other right answer!” Yuuto reflexively twisted his face into a grimace. Dealing with lurking guerrilla forces was difficult even for modern armies. The US military’s problems in the jungles of Vietnam and the cities of Iraq were good examples of the difficulty of fighting guerrillas. In those conflicts, the Americans had responded by—

Yuuto’s thoughts were interrupted by the rumbling echo of a distant cannonade.

“The Flame Clan Army has started its bombardment!”

“Yeah, I hear it,” Yuuto spat out sourly.

Glaðsheimr’s walls had been made of fired brick and had already suffered massive damage from the recent earthquake. They wouldn’t stand a chance against coordinated bombardment from cannons. But Yuuto knew that wasn’t the real issue, as another salvo’s rumble rang through the air.

“Father! The Flame Clan is bombarding the city without regard for civilian housing!”

“Tch, dammit!” Yuuto clicked his tongue loudly.

When they were dealing with the Viet Cong in the jungles of Vietnam, the Americans had resorted to undertaking wide-sweeping Search and Destroy missions against the guerrillas. Any locations that were suspected of harboring guerrillas, even villages with noncombatants, were relentlessly bombed with napalm. While over the years the US military had refined their counterinsurgency tactics to minimize collateral damage as they switched to fighting in places like Afghanistan and Iraq, the brute force method of

unrestrained bombardment was still one of the most effective ways of countering guerrilla forces. To phrase it differently, bombing enemy targets despite the possibility of collateral damage was a tactic that the Americans had been forced to deploy out of necessity as their losses from guerrilla attacks mounted.

“I knew he’d figure it out eventually, but come on, really? This is the first thing he comes up with?” Yuuto bit down on his lower lip with a frown. He had expected that the earliest Nobunaga would employ this tactic was after several initial skirmishes in the city. As it turned out, his opponent was someone who would always exceed even his most pessimistic projections.

The thundering roar of cannon fire made the air quiver around them. Lead balls the size of a human head crashed straight through the houses lined up on the receiving end of the roaring guns.

“Hahaha! Fire! Keep on firing!” Nobunaga gleefully urged on the cannonade. At the Gjallarbrú Fortress, the strange solid wall had kept his Province Destroyers from showing their true power, so it was quite a delight to see them destroy normal buildings rather than struggle against some unnaturally sturdy wall.

“Ah, I see now, My Great Lord. If we just blast away all of the obstacles, then the enemy’s plan no longer works,” Vassarfall, the man who had been defeated in the initial skirmish, observed with an admiring nod. Nobunaga looked over at him with surprise.

“What, you’re still here? I believe I ordered you to guard the north,” Nobunaga replied.

“I came to pay my respects before leaving.”

“Is that so?”

“Still, it’s quite the sight,” Vassarfall said as he glanced toward Glaðsheimr.

“That wasn’t the response I expected. I figured you’d be raising your voice to object to this indiscriminate destruction.”

“Ha hah, until just recently, you would have been correct to think that. I

would have probably regarded destroying a city steeped in two hundred years of tradition as the behavior of uncivilized barbarians,” Vassarfall explained.

“Heh, that you can say that to my face is impressive.” Nobunaga chuckled with amusement.

In general, Nobunaga was not one to forgive those who spoke ill of him. He held the conviction that a ruler must never let others insult him. In particular, he hated those who would only speak ill of him behind his back. There were plenty who had been punished for that particular crime, even in Yggdrasil. But strangely, Vassarfall’s comments rarely bothered him. That was probably due to Vassarfall’s own virtues, or to more accurately describe it, his unique personality.

“However, I recently came to a realization. All things in this world must one day fall into ruin. This is a law of the gods that no man can hope to escape. Do you understand, My Great Lord?! It’s only when it reaches its end that a piece of art is complete! The flame of life burns at its most beautiful the moment before it’s extinguished! A brief moment of brilliance! It’s in that fragility that true beauty lay! Yes, beauty! Sublimelimination! The end of a city that has built up two hundred long years of history. When I think of the time and life that had been poured into those buildings, I feel a sharp pain in my breast! However, yes, however! The value of art is in how much it deeply moves the heart! Objects that don’t move the heart aren’t truly art! Then! This sight before me that is inspiring such strong feelings in my heart is the pinnacle of art, of the sublime! I thank the gods for granting me the good fortune to be standing here as a witness to this spectacle! Ah... Such beauty! Such sublime beauty! I cannot hold back my tears! Truly sublime art is to be found in explosions!”

Nobunaga nodded as he half-listened to Vassarfall’s oration. Nobunaga was fond of those who were dedicated to whatever path in life they had chosen, particularly those who were so absorbed in the pursuit of their interests and their goals that they lost sight of all other considerations.

Certainly, Vassarfall had no tact and couldn’t read a room. However, it was also clear from his demeanor that he was thoroughly engrossed by the events unfolding before him. He was a man who, once absorbed in a pursuit, art or otherwise, would pull out all the stops to master it. Nobunaga was fond of him

for that reason, fond enough to ignore his occasional indiscretions. It was, after all, men like Vassarfall that made the impossible possible. With that said, he wasn't quite sure he understood what Vassarfall was babbling about.

"Still, are you certain about this course, My Great Lord? You have always been ironclad in your prohibition on harming the subjects of our enemies. Surely destroying the capital goes against that?" Vassarfall, having finished pontificating, changed his tone to one of caution. It seemed he had returned from the world of the sublime. Nobunaga shook his head at how thoroughly Vassarfall marched to the beat of his own drum. If the man weren't so capable, Nobunaga would have cut him down years ago.

"By all accounts, if there were subjects still residing within the city, it would be impossible to avoid being labeled as some kind of tyrannical murderer, which would create resentment in its wake. However, the city is, in fact, completely devoid of civilians. What issue is there in destroying empty buildings?" Nobunaga replied breezily without a hint of hesitation. His ability to switch tactics and methods quickly was another of his remarkable traits. Humans had a tendency to get stuck in routines and cling to their tried and tested means.

Despite the fact that the ends are supposed to be the thing that truly matters, people tended to canonize the means—things that are only supposed to be a method to achieve said ends as rules in and of themselves. People were obsessed with maintaining those forms.

Nobunaga, however, was a man with a remarkable ability to focus upon what was truly important. He was never constrained by methods he had employed in the past. Nobunaga had already thoroughly weighed the costs and benefits of his chosen tactic of bombarding the city. If the houses were empty, then there would be no civilian casualties from destroying them, and that would create no resentment. Given that there were almost no witnesses, they could even blame their enemy for the destruction.

"If problems do happen to arise from this, I'll simply rebuild the city in short order. A lively, comfortable city that would drive any nostalgia for the old out of the heads of its inhabitants! Ha hah!" Nobunaga laughed confidently. There was a great deal of arrogance behind his assumption that he could simply sweep

aside centuries of sentiment and tradition. But it was this very arrogance that made it possible for him to bring about change. Those who were too busy reading a room couldn't take an ax to the room to redecorate it.

"Now, keep firing, men! We have plenty of gunpowder thanks to Homura. Be thorough in your destruction!"

The Flame Clan Army's merciless bombardment of Glaðsheimr continued until sunset.

"As always, it feels like he's methodically smothering me to death," Yuuto murmured gloomily as the cannonade finally ended for the day.

His sullen mood was understandable; the Flame Clan's bombardment had destroyed countless houses throughout Glaðsheimr. The destruction of each house was one less piece of cover for the Steel Clan to take advantage of, and the steady onslaught was eating away at the defensive structures they needed to keep the Flame Clan at bay.

"My projections never seem to work out when it comes to him," he remarked.

Given that Nobunaga had been positioning himself as the new ruler of the continent, Yuuto had expected him to continue playing the part and save the wholesale destruction of buildings in Glaðsheimr as a last resort. His read had completely missed the mark.

"Felicia, gather the generals. We'll hold a war council. Oh, right, don't summon all of the members of the Maidens of the Waves, just bring Bára here. I need the others to be prepared in case the Flame Clan attempts a night raid. Tell the scouts to keep their eyes peeled for any movement from the Flame Clan Army," Yuuto ordered.

"Y-Yes! Understood, Big Brother," Felicia replied. She then hurriedly issued Yuuto's orders to the waiting messengers. It wasn't much later that the Steel Clan's major commanders were assembled before Yuuto.

In attendance were the Sword Clan patriarch Fagrahvél and her strategist Bára; Hveðrungr, former patriarch of the Panther Clan and currently Yuuto's

subordinate and chief of staff; Kristina, the blood daughter of the Claw Clan patriarch and his representative; Haugspori, Assistant Second of the Horn Clan; as well as the patriarchs of the Steel Clan's subordinate clans: the Armor, Shield, Helm, Fang, Mountain Dog, Ash, and Wheat Clans.

"Sorry to call on you all so late at night. It'd be hard to have a calm discussion while we're being bombarded, so I believe it best we discuss our options now," Yuuto said with a tone of appreciation as he looked over the gathered generals. Their expressions were all understandably tense. After all, the Flame Clan had immediately neutralized the tactic that had won the Steel Clan an initial clean victory and offered them hope of greater triumph.

"So, I'm sure you've got something in mind for dealing with that bombardment, Your Majesty?" Hveðrungr was the one who immediately broached the subject. Given there were others present, he maintained a certain formality to his tone, but there was a noticeable hint of defiance underpinning his words. It was as though he was sitting back and waiting to see what Yuuto had up his sleeve.

Yuuto found the implication that Hveðrungr considered himself an observer in this matter slightly irritating, but at the same time, it was also reassuring. It meant that Hveðrungr, at least, was still calm and maintaining his objectivity on the situation. There was no better sounding board.

"Yes, I do. It's a lot earlier than I expected, but this situation was still well within my projections." Yuuto's words prompted a cheerful murmur from the gathered generals. It seemed they were relieved to hear that the situation, though grim, was something Yuuto had already accounted for in his planning and had a ready response to deal with.

The cannons had been a serious thorn in the Steel Clan's side at the Siege of Gjallarbrú Fortress. Their destructive power was so far beyond anything that Yggdrasil's typical defensive technologies were designed to handle that they seemed almost like instruments of divine destruction. Yuuto sympathized with the anxiety his generals had felt facing them.

"That said, at this very moment, we have the pick of the Steel Clan's great and cunning generals assembled here. I'd like to hear your opinions first," Yuuto

said with a faintly teasing curl of the lips. He could very well have started out the war council with his own proposal, but he had something specific in mind.

Legend had it that Tokugawa Ieyasu would first have his retainers engage in spirited debate at the start of any meeting, only offering his own views at the end of the discussion. The ruler's opinion, for better or for worse, whether in agreement or not, often ended up framing the discussion, and could prevent those present from proposing or even seeing a better path forward. Ieyasu had chosen to withhold his views to avoid prejudicing deliberations. Given that Yuuto was facing an opponent that Ieyasu, the final victor of the Warring States Period, had feared as the greatest warlord of the age, there was no harm in taking every available precaution.

"Haugspori. How would you deal with it?"

Yuuto started with Haugspori, one of the Horn Clan's Brisingamen and the man reputed to be the Horn Clan's greatest archer. He had been chosen simply because, as the Assistant Second of the Horn Clan, he was the lowest ranking individual present.

"Whaa?! M-Me, Your Majesty?!" It seemed Haugspori had been caught completely off guard by Yuuto's question, and he appeared flustered as he looked for an answer.

"Yes. If you have a proposal, let me hear it, don't hold back," Yuuto replied.

"Well, uh... Let's see. Why don't we fight back using the catapults positioned on the walls?"

"Mm, I see." Yuuto made a show of nodding his head. It was definitely the sort of answer an archer might come up with. Glaðsheimr's walls had a large number of catapults installed on them. While some of them had been lost to the great earthquake, there were still quite a few left in operation.

"I agree with Lord Haugspori. While they are not as effective as cannons, they *are* on higher ground. We should definitely leverage the range advantage that gives us." Fagrahvél raised her hand and voiced her agreement with Haugspori's proposal. The other assembled generals nodded to one another, as they couldn't find any other alternative under the circumstances.



A faintly mocking snicker suddenly rose from a corner of the room, and everyone turned to look at the source of the laughter. The snickering had come from a red-haired young woman who was dressed in rags that marked her as completely out of place among the assembled officers. However ragged her clothing, the young woman's eyes were sharp with defiance, and her expression exuded arrogance.

"Did you just laugh at us, girl?" Fagrahvél glared at the young woman, her voice cold and low. It was understandable: she was the ruler of a great clan, and the girl had just mocked a proposal that she had given her approval to.

"Quite the nerve to mock us as a mere servant."

"Lady Kristina, respectfully, you have perhaps erred in bringing this one to this meeting."

The Armor and Shield patriarchs spoke up in agreement.

Both clans were old, traditional clans that dated back to the founding of the Holy Ásgarðr Empire, and their patriarchs had a gravitas appropriate as rulers of such distinguished clans. However, the young woman seemed unfazed by the intimidating glares that were directed in her direction.

"Hold on everyone. Utgarda, what did you find so funny?" Yuuto asked.

The generals glaring at Utgarda blinked their eyes in surprise.

"Lady Kristina, is this..." Fagrahvél began to ask.

"Yes, she's Utgarda, patriarch of the Silk Clan," Kristina answered simply.

Yuuto, however, noticed the gleam of amusement in Kristina's eyes. She was probably enjoying everyone's shocked reaction to Utgarda's presence. The fact that she didn't care if she was dealing with patriarchs in playing what might be considered a prank spoke volumes about Kristina's personality.

"Wha, this is...?!"

"Hrmph."

The Armor and Shield Clan patriarchs appeared rather unimpressed by this development. Their clans were based out of Jötunheimr like the Silk Clan. They

were well aware of Utgarda's reputation. She had doubled the size of the Silk Clan's territories in the handful of years she had served as its patriarch before she had taken down and assimilated the Tiger Clan, one of the Ten Great Clans, through a feat of cunning. Their surprise at seeing her in her current state was understandable.

"Heh heh, it seems Our magnificent reputation is known even in Glaðsheimr." Utgarda's lips curled into an arrogant smirk as she saw the stir the revelation of her identity had caused among the generals. "Yes, We are the great empress Utgarda of the Silk Clan! Lower your heads, dogs of the þjóðann!"

"You're the one who needs to lower your head," Kristina replied curtly.

"Eep!"

Utgarda let out a short yelp after a sharp crack rang out. Kristina had spanked her with the riding crop in her hand. Utgarda sank to her hands and knees and rubbed at her bottom after the blow, and Kristina mercilessly followed up the blow by sitting on Utgarda's back.

"*Former* patriarch. You're no leader now, you're simply my slave. Know your place," Kristina said coldly.

"Y-Yes, my apologies..." Utgarda replied meekly.

Even Yuuto blinked in surprise as Utgarda's attitude flipped in an instant. The Utgarda he knew was the epitome of arrogance, and her self-regard towered far above that of mere mortals. For her to become so subservient in such a short amount of time... Just what had Kristina done to her?

"*No, probably better not to ask. Honestly, it's a bit scary to contemplate,*" he thought to himself.

While he would be lying if he said he wasn't morbidly curious, he was sure that the answer would bring added complications he didn't want or need. Some things were best left unknown. Besides, now was hardly the time or place. No, what actually drew his attention was—

"Utgarda, why did you laugh earlier? Depending on what you say, I'll ignore your disrespect this time," Yuuto said as he focused his gaze upon her.

While she was now a mere slave, had Yuuto and Nobunaga never appeared in Yggdrasil, Utgarda might very well have been the new ruler of the continent. During her reign, the Silk Clan had doubled its agricultural revenue and had succeeded in training war elephants. Her talents as a general were also head and shoulders above most of the commanders assembled here. Those were the reasons why she was present at this meeting despite her current situation.

“Well, uh...” Utgarda hesitated as she turned her head to glance up at the girl seated on her back. The fact that she was prioritizing her mistress’s approval over that of the þjóðann was an impressive display of her submission. Kristina nodded her approval and Utgarda continued. “By all accounts, setting up on the high ground is a vital element in war. However, most of Glaðsheimr’s walls are in ruins. Positioning forces upon them is an idio—I mean, if you were to position your forces upon them, sir, you would have no place to run, would you?”

Her attempt at a respectful tone still needed work, but the generals widened their eyes as her words triggered an epiphany.

“Ah, that’s right. Yeah, in that sense, it’s the wrong move.” Yuuto scratched at his head and agreed that Utgarda had pointed out the fatal flaw in Haugspori’s plan. The other generals who had also drawn the same conclusion nodded with pained expressions.

It should have been obvious with a little thought. Positioning on high ground like city walls meant that if the enemy held the exits, the forces on those walls would be trapped with no prospect of escape. Haugspori’s plan had essentially been predicated on the assumption that the walls were completely intact and prevented the enemy from entering the city.

“Heh heh. So, you’ve realized your stupidity, have you?” Utgarda crowed triumphantly.

However, from Yuuto’s perspective, it was a bit harsh to point out that the generals had missed this fact. They had never dealt with a situation where they remained within a fortification after the defensive walls had collapsed in multiple locations and left wide open entrances for the enemy.

Ordinarily, they would have abandoned a fortification whose defenses had been so thoroughly compromised and retreated to the intact inner walls further

within the city. Standard siege tactics assumed that there were walls to keep the enemy out. Every person had their limits when it came to processing new information. It was relatively common to lose sight of the obvious due to a change in the fundamental assumptions behind the conflict.

“I’m impressed that you noticed.” Given that he was in a desperate situation where he needed every asset he could use, Yuuto offered his sincere praise to Utgarda. He had been right to summon her here.

“Bwa ha ha ha ha ha! This is simple for a mind like Ours!” Utgarda cackled in triumph, a rather surreal scene given that she was on her hands and knees and being used as a human chair.

“Quiet. Such behavior is disrespectful in front of the patriarchs.”

Kristina’s riding crop once again snapped against Utgarda’s flesh. Perhaps because of her sheer, overwhelming pride, humility was one lesson she wasn’t able to fully learn despite her intelligence. It seemed Kristina still had some work ahead of her.

“Tsk. It seems you still need a bit more discipline,” Kristina told her coldly.

“Yes, thank you, mistress! Please offer your discipline to this unworthy cur!”

“...Hm?” Yuuto furrowed his brow at Utgarda’s immediate response. There was no doubt that she had been trained to respond that way by Kristina, but he thought he detected a trace of glee in her voice.

“No, no, I’m just imagining it. She was an awful tyrant who let her sadism get the better of her. I mean, I’ve heard that sadists can sometimes awaken to a hidden masochism within them, but that can’t be it, right?”

Yuuto immediately dismissed the idea and took another look at Utgarda’s expression. He noticed a faint smile of pleasure. He quickly decided to pretend he didn’t see that. This wasn’t the time to be investigating that anyway. But he couldn’t help but add silently.

“Just what the heck did you do to her, Kristina?!”

“Any other opinions? How about it, Brother Rungr?” Yuuto asked Hveðrungr

as if to change the subject and return the conversation to its original topic. Hveðrungr had been the one who had challenged him. Yuuto was partly driven by a desire to get back at him, but he also wanted the brilliant tactician's input.

"Let me see. First of all, we need to devise an approach to deal with those cannons. Following that, the standard follow-up would be a night raid to wipe out their forces," he replied.

Yuuto nodded as he did his best to hide his disappointment. It was a boring proposal that anyone could have come up with. Given that Hveðrungr had continually exceeded Yuuto's expectations with outlandish tactics, he had been hoping for more, but...

"Which, of course, the enemy would be expecting to happen." Hveðrungr had deliberately waited a beat before continuing, his lips curled into a sardonic smile as he observed Yuuto's reaction.

It seemed he had noticed Yuuto's attempt to get back at him and had decided to pay him back with interest. It was a good reflection of his personality. While he was choosing his words carefully because they were in public, Hveðrungr was still Hveðrungr. Still, he was a reassuring presence at times like this. Right now what Yuuto needed from Hveðrungr wasn't respect or loyalty. It was his skill in reading the enemy and drawing them into traps.

"So we'll use that caution to our advantage," Hveðrungr stated.

"Oh?" Yuuto leaned forward, his interest piqued.

"For example, how about this?" Hveðrungr began to describe his scheme, one that was exactly the sort of plan he was known for and exactly what Yuuto had hoped he would provide.

"You really are a conniving bastard!" Yuuto exclaimed.

It was lavish praise masquerading as an insult. Yuuto was continually impressed by Hveðrungr's ability to come up with tactics that seemed to cause the enemy as much distress as possible.

"What a terrible thing to say. For my part, I'm simply trying to take the Steel Clan's budget into account by reusing otherwise useless junk. I'm quite the epitome of a thoughtful little brother, am I not?" Hveðrungr responded as he

shrugged his shoulders and sighed with displeasure, wearing a smile on his face all the while.

“Well, if that’s what you want to call it,” Yuuto replied.

“Do I detect a trace of venom in that comment, Your Majesty?”

“You certainly do.”

Even as he exchanged small barbs with Hveðrungr, Yuuto processed Hveðrungr’s proposal and simulated it in his mind. It wasn’t bad. In fact, it was quite impressive. Given that they were under siege and the Flame Clan Army had surrounded the city, the Steel Clan’s resources were limited. Hveðrungr’s plan took that into account and effectively killed two birds with one stone.

“Oh dear. It seems you have the wrong idea about me, Big Brother Yuuto. But, well, I can always clear up that misunderstanding later. Perhaps it’s about time to hear your proposal, Your Majesty? I’m sure the others are on the edges of their seats waiting to hear what you have in mind,” Hveðrungr said theatrically, waving his hand toward the assembled generals. Reading between the lines, Yuuto knew he was basically saying, “Let’s see if you can top my proposal.” Hveðrungr really was something.

“I might have made a mistake by giving Brother Rungr the spotlight. He raised the bar quite a bit,” Yuuto thought to himself.

If he proposed something half-assed, he’d look bad in comparison to Hveðrungr. That would negatively impact Yuuto’s influence with the generals and create a potential problem in a delicate situation. Hveðrungr was essentially like a dangerous drug, one that could be poison if mishandled. But, if Yuuto couldn’t handle Hveðrungr, there was no way he could defeat Oda Nobunaga.

“My plan, you say? Well, that’s...”

ACT 2

The Flame Clan Second Ran's full name was Mori Naritoshi. However, Nobunaga, who had known Ran since he was a baby, continued to call him Ran despite him taking on the name of Naritoshi when he had come of age.

Given that it was how Nobunaga himself called him, references to him had always used some variation of the name, with even official documents referring to him as Ran or Ran-Houshi. Houshi simply meant "boy" and it was a common part of a samurai's childhood name during the Warring States Period. It meant, essentially, that despite coming of age, Ran had continued to be regarded as a "boy" by his liege lord Nobunaga.

There were plenty who referred to him as Ran or Ran-Houshi, not out of respect for Nobunaga's choice, but due to their jealousy at how much Nobunaga favored him. An example of this favoritism that many looked to was Nobunaga's granting of five hundred koku to Ran when he had come of age. A koku was a Feudal-era measurement that equated to the amount of rice required to feed a single person for an entire year. This measurement was also used informally to determine the prosperity of a lord's domain.

Ordinarily, it would have been understandable if Ran had resented being called by his childhood name, and even blamed Nobunaga for being treated as a mere boy despite being a man. Despite ample justification to do so, Ran never paid any heed to the passive-aggressive insults directed at him, and indeed, he didn't feel a trace of resentment over it. Nobunaga wanted to call him Ran. To Ran, that was the only reason that mattered. It didn't matter to him what others thought of him or said of him.

There was a telling anecdote from Ran's time as Nobunaga's squire that epitomized his belief that Nobunaga was the only thing that mattered. When Ran was carrying a tall pile of oranges on a tray, Nobunaga had teased him that with his strength he would trip and fall. Ran, in fact, did trip and drop the oranges, giving Nobunaga a satisfied chuckle, but Ran had, according to the

story, tripped on purpose.

Another retainer had once criticized him, stating, “How dare you trip in front of the Great Lord!” Ran, however, replied calmly without batting an eye. “The Great Lord said I was going to trip, so that was how it had to be. If I hadn’t, it would have meant the Great Lord had been mistaken.”

It was an anecdote that showed that if Nobunaga said an object was white, then Ran would take even a black object and bleach it white, an indication of just how loyal Ran was to Nobunaga. Ran had only served as Nobunaga’s squire for five or so years, but there were countless episodes of this kind during that period, such as the story of the fingernails and the door. To Ran, Nobunaga was an absolute being, the sole, god-like center of his universe.

“Right then, there are no enemies about. Bring in the hedgehogs! Hurry! Sentries, keep guard. Arquebusiers, be ready to fire at a moment’s notice. If you see anyone suspicious, fire without hesitation! All other soldiers, maintain defensive formation even if the enemy appears!” Ran rapidly issued orders at the Flame Clan Army’s position at Glaðsheimr’s southern gate.

The cannonade earlier in the day had destroyed a great deal of the houses along Glaðsheimr’s southern side, but this was an enormous city. Even cannons couldn’t reach the buildings beyond Glaðsheimr’s walls from outside the city itself. In order to continue their demolition of the city, they needed to set up a position within the city limits, and this was the sort of task that Ran did exceedingly well.

“Little more than rubble remains. Hurry and carry it out! Do whatever you must to finish this today. Teams that do well will be rewarded. Give it your all!” Ran looked around and shouted encouragement at the soldiers around him.

He took a page from Hideyoshi’s book and made certain to divide the soldiers into ten teams, making them compete against each other. There was a part of Ran that didn’t want to use Hideyoshi’s methods. The reason being that, according to Suoh Yuuto, Hideyoshi was a traitor who had pushed aside Nobunaga’s children and conquered the country. However, results mattered more than his own sensibilities in this situation.

Piles of rubble were perfect for hiding small groups of soldiers. Ran was well aware of how dangerous suicide bombers could be after the recent battle at Gjallarbrú. He couldn't afford to leave any terrain for the enemy to exploit. And more than anything—

“Don't provide the enemy with an opening. We may have the advantage now, but they may very well tear out our throats if we let our guard down in the slightest,” Ran murmured with a tense expression, glaring at the wheelbarrows used by the soldiers.

They were loot that the Steel Clan Army had abandoned as they retreated from Gjallarbrú Fortress. Questioning a prisoner of war had revealed they were a new innovation by the þjóðann. The wheelbarrows may have seemed inconsequential in the grand scheme of things, but for Ran, their sheer utility and the various mechanisms that went into their creation inspired not awe, but a shiver of dread.

“They clearly have superior technology to us. The only reason we have the advantage is our overwhelming numbers and the Great Lord's leadership abilities. However...” Ran thought to himself as he bit down on his lower lip in frustration.

He sincerely believed that his master, Nobunaga, was a man sent from the heavens to bring the chaos of the Warring States Period to an end. He had no doubt that because Nobunaga had almost completed the task in the Land of the Rising Sun, the gods had then sent Nobunaga to do the same here in Yggdrasil. There was no other explanation for the strange twists of fate that had brought him to this fantastical place.

Not a single person alive could oppose Nobunaga, the man who had been chosen by the heavens above, of that there was no doubt—or so that would have been the case, had they not met Suoh Yuuto.

“His advanced technology is one thing, but even more surprising is his rapid growth. It's completely beyond reason...”

Suoh Yuuto's leadership at the First Battle of Glaðsheimr had been impressive. He had staged a surprise attack and pushed back when the Flame Clan had been enjoying an overwhelming advantage. Even accounting for the

fact that he had been utilizing numerous Einherjar and equipment from the future, the coordination between the Steel Clan's forces and Suoh Yuuto's ability to read the flow of battle was far beyond the norm for any general Ran knew of. This coming from a boy still in his teens.

Still, considering the heights Yuuto had attained, Ran had believed there was little room for growth in the boy. That was until he saw what happened to Vassarfall within the walls of Glaðsheimr.

"He's grown reasonably more skilled than during the first battle a mere handful of months prior. He seems to be much faster in his decision-making too."

While a common adage in his homeland noted that boys grew so quickly that if you looked away from them for three days, they'd be unrecognizable, there were still limits. Given that Suoh Yuuto had already been an extraordinarily skilled general at the First Battle of Glaðsheimr, it shouldn't have been possible for him to show such explosive growth. Something must have clicked for him, but it was absurd nonetheless.

"As much as Suoh Yuuto has grown, the Great Lord is still a tier or two above him. At least, for the moment."

Nobunaga was at the very peak of his abilities, while their opponent was still growing. It was a law of nature that all things, once at their peak, would steadily and inexorably decline. Even Nobunaga wasn't exempt from that rule. While he still seemed driven and full of energy, there was something Ran felt was off about him in recent months. If pressed, he wasn't able to articulate it clearly, but there was something that made him anxious about Nobunaga.

What settled the matter was the fact that Nobunaga had entrusted Homura's future to Ran once he was gone. Nobunaga was over sixty years of age—an age where he could die at any moment. There was nothing strange about taking precautions, particularly given Nobunaga's penchant for making intense and thorough preparations in any endeavor. Still, there was something that felt strange to him. He hadn't been the type to say those sorts of things in the past, had he?

"We need to settle this here and now," Ran said with steely determination.

While Nobunaga himself had left Homura to his care, Ran's one and only liege lord was Nobunaga. Making Nobunaga the conqueror of the known world was the heartfelt desire of not just Ran, but his entire family.

"Spear play is the realm of the soldier. An officer must be well-educated." Ran's mother had started to say those words like a mantra from the winter of his sixth year.

It was that year that Ran's birth family, the Mori family, suffered a string of misfortunes. First, in June of that year, Ran's oldest brother, Yoshitaka, had been slain in battle against the Asai-Asakura Alliance. Then, in September of that same year, the head of the family and Ran's father, Yoshinari, had fought against the same Asai-Asakura Alliance with a rear guard of chosen men, stopping both armies in their tracks for several days when they attempted to catch Nobunaga from behind. In the end, Yoshinari had died valiantly, a glorious death in service of his master.

That had been the trigger that caused his mother to be so focused on learning and proper etiquette. Ran had few memories of his father, as he had continually been at Nobunaga's side and fighting across the lands, but given that his parents had six boys and three girls, it had been easy for the young Ran to imagine that it had been a loving marriage. His mother had lost her beloved husband and a beloved son in the space of several months. It was understandable that his mother wanted to avoid losing any more of her children to war.

"The Mori family has come this far with spear play. It's not because of learning or etiquette."

That pressure from his mother had evidently been too much for Nagayoshi, the second oldest of the siblings and the one who had inherited the family mantle. He was as accomplished a warrior as his father, but his mother wouldn't accept the value of that skill. Frustration against his mother culminated in a state of simmering rebellion in the young warrior, which led him to slay a retainer of Nobunaga over a minor disagreement and to engage in verbal spats with his peers. He had committed countless violations of military discipline, and it would have been perfectly natural had he been executed for

those crimes.

However, Nobunaga had instead laughed and dismissed all of Nagayoshi's failings, ultimately rewarding Nagayoshi with a province of two hundred thousand koku after the Kyushu Campaign. The province's wealth was far beyond that of those belonging to other commanders and was comparable to the closest of Nobunaga's retainers. It was true that Nagayoshi had accomplished great feats as a warrior, but even during the Kyushu Campaign, he had committed two major violations of military discipline and been reprimanded for them. Considering that fact, the reward was extraordinary. While Nobunaga liked Nagayoshi himself, Ran was certain that the reward was meant as an accolade to his late father, Yoshinari.

Yoshinari had been one of the longest-serving retainers to Nobunaga, greatly trusted by the Lord himself, and he was the first of Nobunaga's retainers who was not related to the Oda Clan to receive a castle, even over the heads of retainers such as Shibata Katsuie and Sakuma Nobumori, who had served the Oda Clan since the time of Nobunaga's father, Nobuhide. It showed just how much Nobunaga had trusted and valued Yoshinari.

Nobunaga had been deeply affected by Yoshinari's death, and it had been whispered among his retainers that his burning of Enryaku-ji had been meant as revenge for their role in indirectly causing Yoshinari's death. That was just how valuable Yoshinari had been to Nobunaga.

When Ran and his younger brothers had become Nobunaga's squires, and one of his younger brothers had caused a problem, he would forgive them on account of the fact that they were still young. To Ran, Nobunaga had once said, "I have three things I'm proud of. The white falcon I was given by Oshu, the blue horse, and my squire Ran." Even in Yggdrasil, he had been given the great role of Second, even when there were others such as Shiba and Old Man Salk who were just as qualified.

Society in general and even his retainers feared Nobunaga. That much was an undeniable fact. But to Ran, at least, Nobunaga was the gentle benefactor who had warmly cared for the Mori family. He felt he owed Nobunaga so much that he couldn't repay him even in seven lifetimes. Enough that if Nobunaga said the world was flat and the sun rose in the west, he would swear it himself.

“Father and my brothers. Please look after us,” Ran looked up at the sky and murmured as he thought about his family members.

Despite his mother’s best efforts, by the time of the Honno-ji Incident, her eldest son, her fourth son, her fifth son, and Ran himself had died in battle. His two younger brothers had been killed by the Akechi Army’s forces in front of his very eyes. Ran himself had somehow managed to survive, but surely his mother believed he was dead. He felt extremely apologetic about that fact. If it were at all possible, he would have liked to tell her that he was still alive. But that, too, was a dream that would never come true, which was why Ran was prepared to shoulder the burden of the wish his entire family had bled and died to bring about.

“I am lacking in strength and ability, but I swear I will use my life to make Our Great Lord the conqueror of all under the heavens.”

The man once known as a prodigy continued to issue orders as he prepared for the coming battle.

Yuuto let out a disappointed sigh at the scout’s report. “So, they’ve taken out all the stops when it comes to protecting those things, huh?”

The enemy had put up horse guards—simple fences intended to prevent the enemy’s approach—around the cannons and positioned arquebusiers who kept a vigilant watch for any attempts to destroy them. A cavalry charge at such a position would be costly and fruitless. Yuuto found it very irritating to have Nobunaga’s forces setting themselves up in his own backyard, and he had fully intended to attack if given an opportunity, but it seemed that it wouldn’t be so simple.

“Well, we’re preparing our next moves too, so I suppose his movements don’t matter too much...” Yuuto continued as he moved his shogi piece on the board with a satisfying click. Yuuto had always had something of an obsessive personality, and he was competitive when it came to subjects he had put effort into mastering. The appearance of a worthy rival in Hveðrungr had sucked him into the world of shogi.

“Father! Surely we shouldn’t simply sit here twiddling our thumbs! The enemy

is steadily building up their presence in front of our very eyes! This is no time for games!” Fagrahvél, the Sword Clan patriarch, raised her voice in protest. Given her serious, even priggish personality, the sight of Yuuto and Hveðrungr engaging in board games in the middle of the siege was evidently testing her patience.

“So she says. Do you concede?” Hveðrungr asked.

“No way. This is one match I’m going to win at any cost,” Yuuto replied.

“Heh. You say that, but I appear to have the advantage.”

“It’s not over yet. Not by a long shot.”

Yuuto responded to Hveðrungr’s confident taunt with a chuckle of his own. The exchange, however, was enough to push even the ever-loyal Fagrahvél past her breaking point.

“Father!” she yelled out in frustration.

“I know, I know. I can hear you just fine. You don’t need to yell.” Yuuto let out a dry chuckle as he held his hand up to stop her, given that she seemed about ready to flip the table—board and all—in a fit of anger. He wanted to avoid that at all costs.

“In that case...!” Fagrahvél angrily interjected.

“Now, now, Lady Fagrahvél, please calm down.” Felicia anxiously tried to defuse the situation, but her efforts only served to fuel Fagrahvél’s anger further.

“How do you expect me to remain calm as I witness *this*?! I’m sure Lady Rífa is weeping as she watches from Valhalla!”

“No, if anything, I feel like she’d probably lean over with interest and say something like, ‘You better teach me how to play this game too.’” Yuuto could vividly imagine Rífa’s voice saying that very thing, and he chuckled fondly.

“Y-You make a good point...” Fagrahvél, as Sigrdrífa’s milk-sister, knew her late sibling well enough to know Yuuto was probably right. After all, Yuuto’s late wife had been a bubbly, curious woman.

“Still! Lady Rífa cared deeply for her people. Even if all of the residents of the

city have been evacuated, there are still over thirty thousand soldiers left in the city! Please take the situation more seriously!” she continued.

“No, I’m being deadly serious right now. I’m hoping to assign the task of dealing with those cannons to Hveðrungr,” Yuuto replied.

“Oh? Yes, he would be ideal,” Fagrahvél responded in agreement.

“Right? When I broached the subject, however, he said he’d done enough work with the rear guard and told me he planned to just watch quietly from the back.”

“Uncle! The entire clan is at risk! This is hardly the time to be sitting idly by!” Fagrahvél rebuked.

“Great, now she’s angry at me too. Could you not drag me into your mess?”

Hveðrungr made no effort to maintain a respectful facade as he glared in Yuuto’s direction, prompting Yuuto to shrug and laugh.

“Well, you brought this upon yourself really. You said you’d hear me out if I beat you at shogi,” Yuuto stated.

“This farce was your idea!” Hveðrungr replied in frustration.

“Now you’ve made it worse...” Yuuto grumbled in exasperation.

“This man’s presence will make all the difference in the world if we’re going to take out those cannons. So I am, in fact, just doing my job as supreme commander right now!” Yuuto said proudly without the slightest touch of irony or guilt, but Fagrahvél couldn’t contain a long and tired sigh.

“Father, who are you?” she asked.

“What do you mean? I’m Suoh Yuuto.”

“Precisely. You are the þjóðann reigning over the Holy Ásgarðr Empire and the reginarch of the Steel Clan. Surely you could just order him to do it...”

“Well, now that you mention it, that’s true,” Yuuto said with a forced smile, making clear the situation wasn’t as simple as Fagrahvél suggested.

At this point in his life, Hveðrungr was no longer interested in titles, glory, or wealth. If Yuuto attempted to force Hveðrungr to do his bidding, there was a

strong possibility Hveðrungr might simply up and disappear. Given the situation, losing a tactician of his caliber would be an incalculable loss. On top of that, aside from Hveðrungr's value to him as patriarch, he wanted to keep his old friend nearby, both for his own sake and Felicia's. There was too much history that needed to remain a secret, too many complications in their relationship that Yuuto couldn't broach to get Fagrahvél to understand.

"Fagrahvél, your only real fault is that you take everything too seriously," Yuuto said instead, changing the subject.

"I suppose you're right. Bára and Thír often tell me as much, but surely this is a time to take things seriously?" she asked.

"Right, which is why I'm doing exactly that."

"It surely doesn't seem that way!" Fagrahvél's frustration flared up as Yuuto poured more fuel onto the fire. Despite her objections, he simply shrugged and continued nonchalantly.

"You're right. Almost too right. However, there are times when the right argument isn't realistic and not taking things all that seriously can work out for the best."

Fagrahvél furrowed her brow skeptically—it appeared Yuuto's words didn't quite strike a chord with her.

"You know, it's kind of surprising she was able to function as the patriarch of a great clan with such an uncompromising and straightforward personality," he thought to himself.

Yuuto couldn't help but consider that angle as well. Though she herself had ruled fairly and earnestly, it had been Bára and Thír, her top lieutenants, who had helped take care of the less savory aspects of governing and made up for her idealism. Just like Skáviðr had done for him.

"If all it took to get people to act was to have the winning argument, life would be a lot simpler, that's for sure. Thing is, there are times when you need to be a little more devious to get the results you require."

"I see..." Fagrahvél didn't appear convinced—she was still set in her ways, regardless of how other people may have felt about that. It reminded Yuuto of

how he had been before he became a patriarch.

“It’s important for people to have a sense of humor at times. People are emotional creatures. You’ll miss a lot of things if you’re just focused on being serious and thinking through every event so pragmatically. Take it from someone who’s had to deal with it—cutting yourself a little slack can be important.” Yuuto felt a bit ridiculous saying so, given that he was the youngest here, but given that he sat at the top of the hierarchy, it was his job to offer advice to his subordinates, particularly because Fagrahvél’s abilities were part of the key to winning this battle.

“Well, um...” Fagrahvél demurred, as it seemed Yuuto’s remark struck close to home. Evidently, this was also something others had warned her about in the past. “...Do I really seem that uncompromising?”

“Yeah, you’re just like I used to be. You’ve always got this grim look on your face.”

The moment Yuuto furrowed his brow into a tense expression, Bára burst out laughing.



“M-Myyy apologiiiies. Your impressssion is far tooooo accurate!”

Even as she voiced her apology, Bára continued to laugh, pounding the floor as she struggled to breathe. It seemed it had struck her as particularly funny. Of course, the fact that Bára was able to roll over laughing in front of Fagrahvél, her liege lord, and the þjóðann, showed she was wired differently from the average person. Perhaps that was necessary to be such a skilled tactician though.

“See? I have it on good authority we’re alike,” Yuuto noted with a grin on his face.

“...So it appears, Your Majesty.” Fagrahvél pursed her lips and nodded.

“I mean, given the situation we’re in, I understand how it’s hard not to brood,” Yuuto said with an empathetic nod. Over the last year, he’d been dealing with the overwhelming and despairing reality hanging over him that Yggdrasil was going to sink into the sea. “Remember this, though. It’s in the times when you’ve driven yourself into a corner that you make mistakes.”

“...That’s all too true.” It was Hveðrungr, rather than Fagrahvél who murmured their agreement with Yuuto’s statement.

When Hveðrungr had still been Loptr, he had felt cornered as Yuuto began to rise through the ranks of the Wolf Clan at breakneck speed. In the end, he lost all perspective and made a deadly mistake. His remark was a form of self-deprecating commentary about his own past.

“For that reason, it’s when you can’t afford to lose that you should cut yourself the most mental slack. That’s the key to winning. Like so.”

Hveðrungr couldn’t contain his note of surprise at Yuuto’s next move. That one piece had completely changed the course of the game, and short of Yuuto making some truly epic blunder, there was little chance of Hveðrungr fighting his way back into a checkmate.

“Fine. You’ve won this time.” Hveðrungr clicked his tongue sourly and conceded his defeat.

“Phew.”

Yuuto let out a sigh of relief as he just barely managed to eke out a win. The match had been close, if he hadn't thought of that last move on the fly, it was very likely things would have ended differently. Either way, a win was a win.

"So, there we go. Good luck out there." Curling his lips into a grin, Yuuto stood up from the game board, his victory removing any need for him to remain in the room.

When Liu Bang and Xiang Yu had vied for supremacy in ancient China, it was said that Xiang Yu had won ninety-nine battles, but Liu Bang had won the one battle when it truly counted. It was a lesson in how losing streaks mattered little so long as one won the pivotal battle. The losing battles provided an opportunity to learn the opponent's habits and patterns, letting one draw the opponent into growing overconfident.

"Damn it all, that's why I hate playing you." Hveðrungr's sour remarks were a balm to Yuuto's heart.

"Gods damn him, he always manages to find just the right way to really get me worked up." Hveðrungr's anger hadn't settled by the time he had returned to his room, and he irritably kicked at the walls.

He had recently started harboring the secret goal of beating Yuuto when he was putting his full effort behind something. Because of that, he had maneuvered Yuuto into a situation where he couldn't afford to lose, but the result had turned out to be another disappointment for him.

"I thought I could beat him..." Hveðrungr muttered.

He had anticipated that Yuuto had a hidden tactic up his sleeve, but even knowing that, he was confident he could overcome that challenge. No, he *needed* to overcome and surpass Yuuto under those circumstances to truly win a victory against him. Indeed, early in the game, Yuuto had played hands that he had previously kept hidden from Hveðrungr, but Hveðrungr had still been able to adapt to them. He had pushed his advantage into the late game, only to have Yuuto once again turn the tables at the very end. There was something exceptional about Yuuto and his ability to pull a rabbit out of his hat when it mattered most. It was almost as though he was gifted with divine inspiration. Of

course, that was what made facing off against him such a worthwhile challenge.

“I’ll win next time.” Hveðrungr gripped his hand into a fist, his spirit filled with determination. In order to accomplish that goal, however, he needed to deal with the situation before him. After all, it’d be hard to focus on shogi without doing something about the Flame Clan Army besieging the city.

“This would usually be an excellent night for a sneak attack.”

The night was pitch black as Hveðrungr gazed outside. Tonight, it appeared, was a new moon, meaning it was the darkest night of the month. Ordinarily, that darkness meant it was harder for the enemy to detect the approach of attacking forces. The presence of individuals such as Homura and Vassarfall who could locate incoming enemies without any visual cues meant that getting close enough to the Flame Clan’s artillery without being detected was essentially impossible. However, the darkness did mean that past a certain distance, there was still room for using the shadows to his advantage.

“Sigh... Damn him for throwing this into my lap,” Hveðrungr muttered with a sigh. His wounds from his recent excursion with the rear guard hadn’t finished healing, yet he was already preparing to head out again.

“Hm?”

Hveðrungr narrowed his eyes as he heard approaching footsteps. He was an outsider within the clan. The fact that he had become a valued adviser to Yuuto in such a short period was sure to have made him some enemies. There was no harm in being cautious. That caution didn’t last long, however, and Hveðrungr let out his breath. The footsteps he heard were familiar.

“Felicia, you can come in.” He called over to the door when he’d judged she was in front of it.

“Impressive as always, older brother.” With that remark, Felicia entered the room. She looked a bit uncomfortable; fidgeting slightly as she entered the room.

“What, come to see me off?” Hveðrungr asked with an impish grin.

“Wh-Why would I want to...!” Felicia pouted and forcefully objected as

Hveðrungr teased her about her presence.

Ever since Hveðrungr had joined the Steel Clan, Felicia had regarded him with a certain hostility and emotional distance. While there were times she'd unconsciously slip back into her role as his younger blood sister, the moment she realized she had done so, she would renew her prickly attitude.

"Well, I suppose that makes sense..." Hveðrungr thought to himself.

He had tried to kill her beloved Yuuto and had killed the sworn father she had admired. No doubt she had been the recipient of hostile gazes simply because she was related to him. If anything, it would have been strange if she didn't resent him.

"I see... Did Yuuto have some kind of message for me?"

"No, there's nothing of that sort..." Felicia replied.

"Then why are you here?"

"Huh?! Well, uh..."

For whatever reason, Felicia seemed caught off guard by the question and began fidgeting more visibly, causing Hveðrungr to knit his brow in shock under his mask. His sister was flexible enough to be able to respond quickly and appropriately to most situations. Seeing her at a loss as the result of such a simple question was entirely unexpected.

"Oh, right, your wound! I came to check on your wound!" Felicia said as she pointed straight at Hveðrungr's left shoulder. Hveðrungr was obviously not a man so naive he'd fall for such an obviously improvised answer. It seemed his sister was aware of his skeptical gaze.

"I-I don't care about you at all, older brother, b-but the fate of the Steel Clan rests on this operation. There's no room for error. It might not be your dominant arm, but you're going to be drawing a bow, yes? Pain might cause your aim to go awry. That might very well be fatal. Bandaging techniques can greatly affect the amount of pain you feel, so, since it's so important, I've come to make sure your bandages are properly wrapped. Don't misunderstand my intentions. This isn't for your sake, older brother, but rather for Big Brother and the Steel Clan. I'm only here because I have no choice!" Felicia rambled, her

words flowing out in a quick torrent. The eloquence of her excuses, if anything, made it clear that she was lying.

“I see. Thank you, then.” Hveðrungr somehow restrained the urge swelling within to tease her and instead held out his shoulder for her. The wound did, in fact, still ache, and given he was going back out onto the battlefield, any reduction in pain was welcome. Losing that opportunity by angering Felicia with a cutting remark would have been unwise.

“...Very well.” Felicia let out a sigh of relief at Hveðrungr’s lack of questioning and began to unwrap the bandage around his left shoulder. She then removed the mugwort leaves that had been placed on the wound. Mugwort, when chewed or crumpled, helped with clotting and prevented infection, making it a commonly used medicinal herb in Yggdrasil.

“Well, it seems the wound hasn’t fully closed yet. Movement could cause it to reopen,” Felicia said as she checked the wound.

Nobunaga’s gunshot had gouged out a piece of his outer shoulder about the size of the tip of a pinky finger. It wasn’t a huge impediment to the movement of his arm, but it wasn’t the sort of wound that healed in a mere five days.

“Let me sterilize it first.” Following that, Felicia produced a small bottle from the pouch on her hip. There was a clear liquid within.

“...That again?” Hveðrungr said sourly, prompting a smirk from his sister.

“Heh, that’s right, you screamed when this was applied to you.”

“That was just the first time. Anyone would scream that way if they were suddenly exposed to that sort of pain without warning.” Hveðrungr practically pouted as he retorted.

Felicia, upon seeing his wound when he returned from the rearguard action, had started treating him by splashing burning water on his wound. It was hard for Hveðrungr to put the agony from that moment into words. It had far exceeded the pain he had expected when she had said she was going to clean out his wound, and even Hveðrungr couldn’t avoid howling as she went on with her business.

“Thinking back to that is still quite satisfying, if I’m honest,” Felicia said with

an expression of amusement.

She was kidding, obviously—somewhat, at least. A part of her had clearly enjoyed that experience. Given the amount of responsibility Hveðrungr bore for the stress in her life, it was understandable.

“...It seems I chose the wrong healer,” Hveðrungr said with some concern.

“Oh not at all. I don’t allow my personal feelings to affect the treatment of my patients. Don’t insult me like that,” Felicia replied.

“If you say so.”

“Oh shush. Yes, this does hurt, but this medicine has dramatically reduced the number of wounded who die as a result of their injuries. It’s a valuable potion that’s really too good for you, older brother.” Felicia puffed out her cheeks in a pout as she uncorked the bottle, pouring some of the contents from the bottle onto a piece of linen she had retrieved from her pouch, before dabbing it against Hveðrungr’s wound.



“Tch!”

A searing pain burned in his shoulder, but Hveðrungr contained his grunt of pain.

“It’s not so bad once you’re used to it.”

He forced himself to smile, as though to show he was unaffected. He was her older brother, so he certainly couldn’t let her see him wince.

“...Hm?”

When he caught the scent of the burning water, Hveðrungr furrowed his brow in thought. The pain had been too great the first time for him to notice, but it was a scent that he found strangely familiar. It wasn’t quite the same—this liquid didn’t have any of the additional scents that were usually mixed with this specific aroma. It was purer; unadulterated. However, there was no mistaking that scent... This was—

“This is some sort of wine, isn’t it?” Hveðrungr asked.

“Heh, you’ve finally noticed.”

“Yeah, it’s a failure on my part that I hadn’t noticed till now.” Hveðrungr shrugged his shoulders. “Still, I’ve never smelled anything this strong.”

“I’m told that the people of Big Brother’s homeland called this distilled spirit,” Felicia said as she put the cork back into the bottle.

From the earliest antiquity to the modern era, the vast majority of soldiers that succumbed to the horrors of war weren’t killed by enemy soldiers, but rather by disease. Even mild wounds that wouldn’t otherwise be lethal, would, when infected, result in death from gangrene or diseases such as tetanus, which, prior to the invention of its vaccine, had a mortality rate of well over fifty percent. Alcohol was an effective method of sterilizing wounds to prevent infection, and when Yuuto had become patriarch of the Wolf Clan, he had started distilling high-proof spirits and distributing them to his logistics units.

Alcohol sterilization of wounds as a concept had been known even in the ancient world, and that was true of Yggdrasil as well. However, the strongest alcoholic concoctions in Yggdrasil were wines that were at best ten to fifteen

percent alcohol by volume and weren't particularly effective at sterilization. Prior to Yuuto's term as Wolf Clan patriarch, many of the clan's soldiers had died as a result of infected wounds. Distillation allowed the creation of much more potent forms of alcohol. The proliferation of distilled alcohol had dramatically reduced the number of wounded Wolf Clan and later Steel Clan soldiers who died from infection.

Of course, Hveðrungr was interested in something else entirely.

"Can you drink it?" he asked. Hveðrungr was extremely fond of alcohol, it was the one thing that could burn away the black thoughts that swirled deep within him. He had been completely enthralled by wine when he was at his worst, but even now, he still enjoyed it as a balm to the lingering darkness that rattled around his head. Surely the purity of the clear liquid meant it was much more potent as a balm as well.

"It can be drunk, yes. That said, it doesn't have much flavor. It's very strong, and it'll get you intoxicated rather quickly," Felicia replied.

The medicinal alcohol was distilled from a blend of barley, wheat, and rye. It went through several cycles of distillation before being filtered through activated charcoal made of white birchwood. Because it was being produced for medical use, it wasn't cut with much water. In modern terms, it was essentially a high-proof vodka.

"I don't believe that I've seen this making the rounds at the markets. Why not sell it? There's surely demand for it. It would enrich the lives of the people and the coffers of the clan at the same time, would it not?" Hveðrungr asked, as his mind quickly went through the possibilities offered by the product in the bottle.

In truth, there were quite a few men who drank not to enjoy the flavor but simply to get drunk. Hveðrungr himself always sought the euphoria of the alcohol more than the flavor of the wine. Such men would have been an eager consumer base for distilled spirits.

"We weren't able to make enough for that. The grains necessary for its production are mostly used to feed the people, and we've fought far too many wars to build up a surplus. In war, it's not only useful for treating wounds, but also for cooking the rations for soldiers. There simply wasn't enough to provide

it to the civilians as well,” Felicia answered.

“I see, that makes sense.” Hveðrungr nodded in understanding. Yuuto had spent the last four years engaged in one war after the other.

“Big Brother initially wanted to sell it as a drink. Both Lord Jörgen and Lord Skáviðr gave favorable reviews after trying it.”

“Oh?!”

Hveðrungr leaned forward after he heard Felicia’s words. Both Jörgen and Skáviðr were of high rank and had consumed all sorts of expensive wines in their lives. The fact that they had approved of distilled spirits made Hveðrungr all the more curious.

“Then I would definitely like to try it,” Hveðrungr stated excitedly.

“Wha?! No, you can’t. This is for medical—Oh.”

Hveðrungr took advantage of a momentary opening to grab the bottle from Felicia’s hand.

“Wait, older brother!” she yelled.

“Heh, don’t be such a killjoy. It’s gotten cold, so this’ll help me stay warm tonight.”

As he said that, Hveðrungr popped open the bottle and poured the contents into his mouth.

“Gaack! Hack! Wheeze!”

The strength of the spirit had far exceeded his expectations, and he coughed violently as the alcohol burned a path down his throat. What in the name of the gods was this?! The way it stung his wound had told him it was strong, but this was far beyond anything he had imagined. It was as though he had poured molten lava down his throat!

“That’s why I tried to stop you...” Felicia said with an exasperated shake of her head.

Alcohol used for wound sterilization was eighty percent alcohol by volume, in contrast to the four to ten percent of the commoner’s ales or the fifteen

percent of the wines enjoyed by the wealthy upper class. No matter how accomplished a drinker Hveðrungr might be, it was far too strong to handle without any warning.

“Guh... Th-This isn’t something you can drink!” Hveðrungr replied through a fit of coughing strong enough to have potentially killed him. The heat had subsided a bit in his throat, and Hveðrungr murmured the complaint between labored breaths.

“You’re supposed to cut it with water or fruit juices to drink it,” Felicia stated.

“Only women and children would consider ruining a drink in such a way.” Hveðrungr spat out the words as though to say cutting alcohol with anything was far too unmanly a thing for someone like him to do. That was an understandable attitude in Yggdrasil, where brewed alcoholic beverages were the norm.

“Heh heh... I feel a big weight lifting from my heart when I see you rolling around in pain like that...” Hveðrungr’s little sister said with a bright, innocent smile. It was a terrible thing to say given that he had suffered the shoulder wound for her sake, but, well, he hadn’t exactly told her as much, and given the things he had done to this point, her attitude was also understandable.

“You always look so cool and calm when you deal with anything...and then you... Oh, your face when you were... It’s priceless... Ha ha ha!” No longer able to contain her amusement, Felicia broke out into hearty laughter, wiping tears from her eyes. It seemed the sight had been quite amusing for her. “Heh heh. My, I feel like a scar that was stuck in my chest just broke off and vanished.”

“...So glad to hear that.” Hveðrungr snorted in displeasure. He was familiar with the concept of schadenfreude and was quite fond of indulging in it himself, but it was another thing to be on the receiving end.

“Well, in return for, well, this, I’ll call it even for everything. Call it forgiveness... The past is all water under the bridge now,” Felicia said as she wiped the tears from her eyes. There was a hint of levity in her voice, but Hveðrungr couldn’t dismiss it as a mere jest.

“Wait, everything?” Hveðrungr asked.

“Yes. Everything from three years ago to now.” Felicia smiled brightly, as though a cloud over her heart had lifted.

“Are you sure?” he asked once again, seemingly unable to understand what was going on. In Hveðrungr’s eyes, his sins were too heavy to simply wash away. He felt that from the bottom of his heart. He had never thought he’d be forgiven by Felicia, nor had he any intention of asking for her forgiveness.

“Part of me wants to say no. But, yes, I’m sure. Indeed, all the things you’ve done shouldn’t be so easily forgiven, older brother. Frankly, I can’t totally forgive you and don’t really want to either. Just thinking about it squeezes at my heart, and I feel a wave of anger well up inside of me as I recall those memories,” Felicia said bitterly as she gripped her hands into fists.

Hveðrungr wisely refrained from pointing out she had just mentioned forgiveness, having learned from years of fights with women that they were more than capable of dragging up slights from years in the past to fuel their fury. He knew from those experiences that arguing just made things worse.

“But, even then, I just can’t bring myself to hate you, older brother. No matter what happens—no matter what you do—you’re still my one and only brother by blood.” Felicia shook her head as though in tired resignation.

Hveðrungr, too, understood her sentiment all too well. When Felicia had chosen Yuuto over him, he had sworn that he was no longer her brother and she was no sister of his. Even so, his heart wouldn’t let him stand by that oath. The love of family, even for someone as cold and calculating as Hveðrungr, was so deeply rooted in him that he couldn’t hold it back. Felicia likely felt much the same. She had probably tried to shut out any love she had felt for him.

“S-So, when you lose... When you get trounced and you need treatment, I’ll call it even if you’ll keep showing that pricelessly dopey face of yours when I treat you. You better be grateful for that!” Felicia pushily insisted to him. Perhaps she had been looking for an opportunity to unclench the fist she had made.

“I see. I’m oh so glad to hear that,” Hveðrungr replied.

“What? Isn’t it enough?” Felicia narrowed her eyes at Hveðrungr as he sarcastically noted his gratitude. Hveðrungr chuckled and shrugged in response.

“It’s just habit. I have no complaints. I really am grateful,” he responded happily.

“Uh-huh...” Felicia’s tone made it clear she was skeptical of his sincerity. That was all Hveðrungr’s fault, given his general sarcasm and cynicism.

“Fine, fine. Then I’ll show you my appreciation by doing a bit of fighting, hm?” Hveðrungr said with a dry laugh. While his expression was unreadable under the mask, his smile was gentle and warm, rather than the sardonic smirk he usually wore just as surely as his mask.

ACT 3

“Looks like we made it in time,” Sigrún remarked as she allowed herself a sigh of relief, having caught sight of the silhouettes of the Flame Clan Army beyond the morning mist. Given that they were still encamped outside of Glaðsheimr, it appeared they had yet to take the city itself.

Although she had faith that Yuuto and the Steel Clan Army under his command would be too much for even the powerful Flame Clan to defeat in a handful of days, she was still greatly relieved to see that they were holding up with no major losses to speak of.

Sigrún turned to Hildegard and offered her thanks. “It’s all thanks to you, Hilda.”

“Th-That’s...good to hear...” Hildegard replied, sprawled out behind Sigrún and gasping for breath. Her face was soaked with sweat, and her slender chest heaved with every breath she took.

Ordinarily, traveling from lárarviðr to Glaðsheimr on foot was a two-week journey. Hildegard had covered that distance running alongside the horses of the Múspell Unit all while carrying Sigrún on her back. Her tiredness was totally understandable given the circumstances.

“Y-You sure you’re fine?” Sigrún asked.

“Do I...look...okay...to you?”

“Not in the slightest. You don’t need to sit in on the war council, so go get yourself some rest.”

Because Sigrún regarded Hildegard as a promising protégé, she was typically harder on the young wolf than her other subordinates, but it was clear to her that Hildegard, despite her superhuman physical abilities, had pushed herself far past her limits. The only thing Sigrún could offer her for the moment was a brief respite.

With that in mind, Sigrún began barking out orders to her various Múspell

subordinates. “Bömburr, get her something filling and nourishing to eat. Jard, Clay, put a tent up for her. We can’t have her catching a cold. Get her some soft blankets too.”

“M-Mother Rún...”

Hildegard teared up at Sigrún’s unexpected show of generosity. Given that Hildegard was thoroughly exhausted, even the slightest kindness felt like a gift from the heavens. Sigrún nodded as she noticed Hildegard’s gaze upon her.

“We need her ready to do her job when it comes time to fight, after all,” Sigrún explained.

“Oh, so that’s why!” Hildegard couldn’t help but retort at Sigrún’s display of her cool, pragmatic reasoning.

Sigrún’s Múspell Unit, both in terms of its reputation and fighting ability, was the most powerful unit in the entire Steel Clan Army. As a consequence of this, its practices were rather spartan. Kindness was typically very low on the list of priorities.

“Of course. You’re one of our best warriors. There’s no way I’m letting you sit on the sidelines with the fate of the Steel Clan at stake.”

“W-Well... I...understand that...” Hildegard muttered between labored breaths, clearly displeased.

“I’m counting on you for this one. I need you ready,” Sigrún stated frankly to Hildegard.

“Ah?! W-Well if you put it that way, w-well...I guess I have no choice.” Her expression quickly brightened at Sigrún’s remark. As usual, Sigrún’s protégé was adorably easy to please. It helped that Sigrún had meant every word.

“*Tch! My right hand still won’t work right.*” A sharp pain ran up Sigrún’s arm as she tried to grip her right hand into a fist: a souvenir from her duel with Shiba in the Realm of Godspeed.

Ordinarily, extended use of the Realm of Godspeed left her entire body sluggish and heavy, as though her limbs were made of lead. However, that usually mostly wore off after three or four days. Thanks to Hildegard carrying

her for the last four days, she had been able to properly recoup. As it stood, she felt about eighty percent rested. Unfortunately, however, her right hand still showed no sign of improvement.

“It might not recover at all...”

She was aware she had probably pushed her body too far, but it was what she needed to do to survive against an opponent like Shiba. If anything, if all she suffered was a permanent injury to her right hand, she had probably come off lightly, given death had been a much more likely outcome at the time.

“No use complaining about something I can do nothing about. I can only make do with what I have available,” she thought to herself.

Sigrún quickly moved past that subject to focus on the more important problems facing her at the moment. Certainly, her martial abilities had always been the pillar that supported her in life. Perhaps she would one day regret the loss of ability that came with a permanent injury. Of course, she would only have that opportunity if she actually survived to regret it. Now wasn't the time to dwell on it.

“It doesn't appear the situation is particularly promising,” Bömburr said as he stood next to her, looking over at the city under siege.

He was a man of large build, and while his fighting ability was perhaps a bit below average within the Múspells as a whole, his logistical skills—his ability to secure supplies, plan marches, and deal with conflicts within the unit—made him an irreplaceable part of the unit's hierarchy. Yuuto himself rated Bömburr so highly that he once said that the Múspell Unit would cease to function without him serving as Sigrún's right-hand man.

“I agree...” Sigrún replied as she turned her gaze toward Glaðsheimr.

The city had been decimated by the recent earthquake, leaving its walls, once the largest and greatest in all Yggdrasil, in ruins with large rubble-filled gaps along their length. As a result, the enemy had an almost endless supply of potential entrances to take advantage of.

“I'd like to somehow rendezvous with Father before the enemy conducts their main assault,” Sigrún stated.

Given how things appeared to be going, Yuuto was probably desperate for additional forces. The addition of the Múspell Unit, the Steel Clan's most elite fighting unit, would be a great help to him.

"So, how do we actually get to him? We can't very well force our way through the enemy lines," Bömburr replied, furrowing his brow as he scratched at his cheek in thought.

The Múspell Unit had approximately two thousand men at their disposal—a stark contrast to the Flame Clan Army's hundred thousand. Although the Flame Clan forces were spread fairly thin around the city to surround it, attempting to charge through them to get into Glaðsheimr would still be paramount to suicide.

"Ideally, we'd receive orders from Father, but... How's the radio transceiver?" Sigrún asked.

"I've been trying to make contact since we arrived, but no luck so far. All we hear is the occasional noises. I believe we're still too far away," Bömburr responded.

"I see... Unfortunately, we can't afford to move any closer."

They had conducted a forced march over three days and three nights with hardly any rest. The Múspell troopers were at breaking point, but more importantly, so were their horses. If they were to approach the enemy in this state, not only would they struggle to put up a credible fight, they might very well even have problems successfully retreating. Given that they were here to reinforce Yuuto, they couldn't afford to give the enemy a morale-boosting victory of that sort.

"Then let's try a carrier pigeon for now. We won't be able to receive any replies, but we can at least tell them we're here. That should have some meaning," Bömburr suggested.

In a siege, nothing boosted the morale of the defenders like news of reinforcements arriving. When those reinforcements were a unit like the Múspells that had brought countless victories to the clan, the effect was even more pronounced.

“Agreed. What message shall we send them?” Bömburr asked.

“I’ll leave that to you,” Sigrún replied.

“Yes, ma’am.”

Bömburr quickly produced a pen and paper from his luggage, wrote out a quick message, attached it to the carrier pigeon’s foot, and set it off. The pigeon followed its nesting instincts and set off for Glaðsheimr...

“Ah!”

—Only to be pierced by an arrow fired at it, which saw it quickly plummet to the ground.

“They shot it down?!” Bömburr yelled with a note of surprise.

A modern-day person, even with perfect 20/20 vision, probably wouldn’t have seen the pigeon as more than a dot in the sky. However, this was Yggdrasil. It was said that almost all of the members of Africa’s Maasai people had eyesight that exceeded 20/5 vision. Even if that wasn’t the case in Yggdrasil, there were plenty of people who could see at levels of around 20/10 vision in modern times.

“Nobunaga is from the same land beyond the heavens as Father. No doubt he knew about carrier pigeons,” Sigrún noted and let out a frustrated sigh, then continued. “It seems it would be pointless to send more of them.”

Nobunaga was a difficult opponent—the methods they had employed against him so far often simply didn’t work, or he had access to similar knowledge and methods.

“So, we’re back to the original issue. How do we contact the main force?” Bömburr inquired.

“We can leave that for later. Our first move now should be to immediately get away from this location,” Sigrún replied.

“Huh?! But we’ve just set up camp—Oh!” Bömburr looked momentarily nonplussed at Sigrún’s words before her reasons dawned on him. Their message, which included their current location, was tied to the carrier pigeon’s leg. That meant the enemy knew where they were. That made staying put

dangerous.

“Whoa?! Wh-What’s going on?!” Poor Hildegard was quickly dragged out of the dreamland she had just settled into.

“I hate to do this to you, but we need to move. It’s an emergency,” Sigrún explained.

“Wha? Whaaaat?!” Hildegard let out a whimpering cry, but Sigrún let it pass this once.

It was clear Hildegard was completely exhausted, and not only that, she had collapsed after reveling in the satisfaction of completing her task, only to be shaken back awake soon after. No doubt she felt the fatigue all the more keenly even as she was being forced back onto a march. Sigrún couldn’t help but pity her, but the enemy wasn’t going to wait for Hildegard to get enough rest.

“Noooo! My bed! My beeeed!” Hildegard pitiably stretched her hand longingly toward her cot, but she was grabbed by the scruff of her neck and dragged away. The gods above had abandoned this poor girl in her time of need, it appeared.



“They have reinforcements, you say?” Nobunaga said calmly, his expression remaining level as he heard his honor guard’s report.

He had been expecting the news since learning of Shiba’s defeat in the south. The arrival was on the early side, but the Múspell Unit was a cavalry unit, and he had accounted for the possibility in his planning. Nothing about the current situation was surprising to him.

“Yes. And this was the message upon the bird,” the guard replied.

“I see.” Nobunaga took the proffered sheet of paper and scanned it.

“While I would like to say go and send a unit to the location in the letter...” Nobunaga began.

“The Second has already issued orders to that effect,” the honor guard informed him.

“Hrmph. As I thought,” he responded, unperturbed by the guard’s comment. As expected, Ran had already taken the necessary steps and had probably chosen the best men for the job.

“Still, we’re talking about the Steel Clan’s greatest general. She’s probably already realized what happened and run off by now.” In Nobunaga’s experience, skilled generals had a particularly keen nose for danger. He had personally avoided disaster on more than one occasion as a result of merely vaguely sensing danger approaching.

“Well, that in itself is fine. Our focus, for now, is Glaðsheimr,” Nobunaga stated.

Everything else was simply a distraction. There was no need to pursue the Múspell Unit—they would show themselves if things in Glaðsheimr looked dire. It was a waste of effort to mobilize any force to follow after them, given that the Múspells had superior mobility. It was better to wait for them to come to him and wipe them out as they approached. That strategy had worked with the Takeda Clan’s famed cavalry. With enough caution, they were easy enough to handle. The more worrying opponent at the moment was still Suoh Yuuto.

“Any movement since then?” Nobunaga asked.

“Nothing that we can see. However, none of the scouts who entered Glaðsheimr proper have returned,” the honor guard responded.

“Is that so?” Nobunaga stroked his chin as he pondered the situation.

Suoh Yuuto wasn't the type of man who would simply sit on his hands and watch as Nobunaga continued to demolish Glaðsheimr as part of his advance. He obviously had something up his sleeve to try to change the tide of the battle. Nobunaga had no idea what form that would take, however. That wasn't an issue though. If he couldn't guess what Suoh Yuuto would do, then he simply needed to be positioned flexibly enough to deal with any eventuality. Nobunaga knew from experience that it was the mindset that was important when it came to dealing with unexpected situations, not specific countermeasures.

With all that in mind, Nobunaga gave his orders. “Very well. Ready cannons! Turn Glaðsheimr into a mountain of rubble!”

“So, why'd you call me out here, Great Uncle?” the man who appeared in front of Hveðrungr asked casually with a ghost of a smile on his lips.

His tone was light, but his gaze made it clear he wasn't amused at the summons. He was standing just outside of effective attacking range from Hveðrungr, with his weight balanced on the back of his heels, ready to jump back at a moment's notice.

“Heh, no need to be so cautious. We had such a lovely time communicating with our bows, didn't we?” Hveðrungr quipped.

“I seem to recall the sentiment behind my arrows was more lethal than friendly,” the man—Haugspori—replied with a sardonic chuckle.

Haugspori was present in Glaðsheimr as the representative of the Horn Clan. He was a renowned general within the Horn Clan and reputed to be not just the greatest archer in the Horn Clan, but perhaps across the entirety of the Steel Clan.

When Hveðrungr had been patriarch of the Panther Clan, he had attempted multiple incursions into Horn Clan territory, and the two had exchanged arrows multiple times. They weren't the only two present, however...

“Ahem, I am rather busy as well, so could you please tell me what it is you want, Uncle?” Kristina, the third, asked impatiently.

She was the other person Hveðrungr had invited to this location. Kristina was the blood daughter of the wily old fox Botvid of the Claw Clan, and she had established a solid reputation as a cunning trickster. Hveðrungr was aware that having these particular people assembled here made it quite clear his scheme wasn't exactly on the up and up, and he couldn't blame them for their caution. After all, what he was about to propose was rather horrible indeed.

“Well, I'm sure both of you can connect the dots given who's here,” Hveðrungr returned as though he were testing his interlocutors. He was a man who lived wearing masks—not only on his face, but countless masks over his own personality. Straightforward conversation felt less comfortable to him than this sort of verbal sparring.

“This is about the Flame Clan cannons, isn't it? We have no real chance unless we can do something about them, after all. Father isn't one to simply leave them to their bombardment, so I assume it has to do with the supplies you had your subordinates haul out here, right, Uncle?” Kristina asked.

“You really do share that fox's blood,” Hveðrungr replied.

It appeared that she was well aware of his movements—without Hveðrungr being aware he was being watched, no less. That was quite the feat in and of itself. It was also rather remarkable that she had a clear grasp of the strategic situation. She made it clear as to precisely why she was the head of the Steel Clan's intelligence gathering despite her youth.

“Still, this is a terrible odor,” Kristina said, pinching her nose as she frowned.

“Heh. I suppose it's a bit too much for a girl, huh?” Hveðrungr remarked with a chuckle.

“That is it... It feels like it's going to seep into my skin. It'd be enough to cause problems in my infiltration missions,” Kristina replied.

“Well, I certainly hope not. But I need your abilities this time. I've gotten Yuuto—uh, Big Brother's permission. If I were being picky, I suppose I would have preferred your older sister for this, though...” Hveðrungr stated frankly.

“My sister? Meaning you want me to read the wind. Or do you want it whipped up?” Kristina asked.

“I want your ability to read the wind. Though if you can cause a wind to blow through the entire battlefield, that’d be more than fine with me,” Hveðrungr explained.

“If we had that sort of power, the Claw Clan would have taken over Yggdrasil a long time ago.”

“True enough.”

Hveðrungr chuckled and shrugged at Kristina’s retort. She was correct in that the ability to control wind at that scale was equivalent to being able to control the weather itself. That power would allow the wielder to control rain clouds, securing bountiful harvests for one’s own clan while condemning one’s enemies to starvation. It would literally be divine in scope.

“If you’re discussing the wind, then do you mean to suggest that you’d want to toss this into the enemy’s ranks using those?” Haugspori, who had hitherto remained quiet, pointed at the trebuchets lined up behind him.

Trebuchets were the Steel Clan’s pride and joy—the siege weapon that enjoyed an overwhelming range advantage in this particular era. Historical trebuchets were capable of flinging boulders of over a hundred forty kilograms over three hundred meters—a range comparable to that of any black powder cannon.

Haugspori, who was currently out of the loop, asked another question of his companions. “Given your topic of discussion, I have to ask... What exactly am I doing here? I’m just an archer.”

“Not to worry, you’ve got your role.”

Hveðrungr smirked as he began to explain his scheme. Haugspori’s expression tensed as Hveðrungr’s description progressed.

“Wait... You want me to do *what*?! Th-That’s a stretch even for me!” Haugspori couldn’t help but raise his voice in disbelief. What Hveðrungr was asking for was simply ludicrous. He’d never considered even trying such a thing.

“If you’re not going to do it, I will. I’ll be taking shots at the same time either way, though. We can’t afford to miss, after all,” Hveðrungr stated.

“Even then...”

“Do as you wish. But if you’re not going to take part, I’ll take the title of the best archer in the Steel Clan. I’ll be doing the same if my arrow hits first as well.”

“Oh, for crying out loud!” Haugspori said with a note of frustration as Hveðrungr hit a nerve.

Haugspori had worked hard to earn his reputation as an archer, putting years upon years of training, trial and error, and hard-fought battles into refining his skill. His pride wasn’t going to let him simply hand over that title.

“Okay, fine! I’ll do it. I’ll do it!” Haugspori shouted in resigned exasperation. “However, if I hit them, you’re going to owe me at least a bottle of wine,” he stated.

“Certainly. I’ll ready a real strong drink, the likes of which you’ve never tasted before.” Hveðrungr nodded magnanimously, though his lips were curled into a malicious grin.

The thunderous roar of cannon fire and the rumble of collapsing masonry echoed through the air.

“It appears they’ve begun.”

“So it seems,” Hveðrungr replied flatly to Kristina’s calm observation.

They had roughly figured out the range of the cannons the day before, and the awareness that they were safely beyond the cannons’ effective range helped add to their sense of calm in contrast to the nervously fidgeting Haugspori.

“Why are we just sitting around?! We’ve got the wind at our backs. Isn’t now the time to be returning fire?!” Haugspori asked, utterly exasperated.

“It’s still too weak. And this wind won’t last long, isn’t that right?” Hveðrungr asked as he looked to Kristina standing at his side.

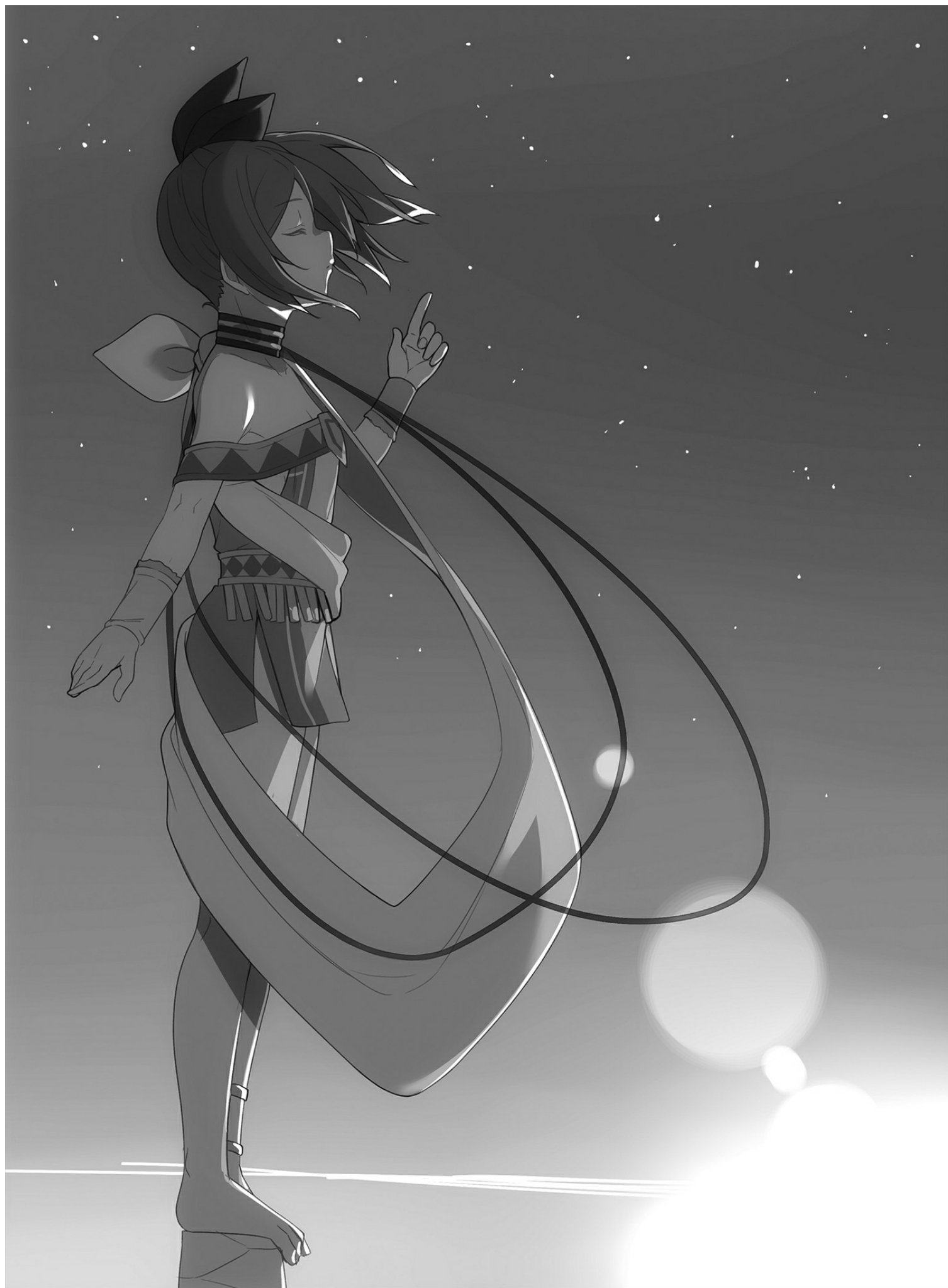
“Yes. As I noted earlier, the wind will change direction within half an hour,” Kristina replied without bothering to look in Hveðrungr’s direction. He knew that while it was typically disrespectful to do so, she wasn’t doing it to insult him. She was simply focused on reading the wind.

“That’s how it goes...”

“You could have let me know that earlier, you know. Sheesh...” Although he groused as he muttered the words, Haugspori stretched out to relax.

Despite the fact that the enemy was lobbing cannon fire in their direction, Haugspori was maintaining his composure without issue. He, too, was a skilled veteran of countless battles, after all. He was regarded as the best tactician in the Horn Clan, and often served as the supreme commander of the Horn Clan’s forces in Linnea’s stead. That was something that required not just brains, but nerves of steel.

“So, I guess we’re waiting for that divine wind, huh?” Haugspori asked.



“That’s about right,” Hveðrungr replied.

“It’d be awfully convenient if it started doing that,” Haugspori quipped.

“I already checked the archives on this one. At this time of year, Glaðsheimr frequently gets strong winds coming from the northeast,” Hveðrungr explained.

“I see. But that word there, ‘frequently,’ is a little worrying,” Haugspori replied nervously.

“True. Still, the chances are quite high that it’ll happen. We’ve got someone who can read the wind with us too. It’s worth taking a gamble,” Hveðrungr said casually, as though he were only talking about the weather and not the fate of the entire clan. He had done everything he could. If the winds didn’t cooperate, then all he could do was curse his bad luck. He’d reached a resigned sort of enlightenment.

“At any rate, now’s the time to be quiet and unmoving,” Hveðrungr stated.

As the Takeda Clan’s motto went: “quiet as a forest, unmoving like a mountain.” Based on his own experience, Homura was like the wind that could read the presence of people. She probably couldn’t detect objects as well as she could living creatures, however.

Vassarfall, according to Kristina’s reports, used sound to determine what was happening at a distance. With those two serving as the enemy’s figurative eyes and ears, then the best thing to do was to stay quiet and not act until the moment was right. Of course, actually waiting for that moment required a great deal of nerve...

The roar of the cannons and the rumble of the collapsing buildings steadily grew closer as the day went on. The wind that had been blowing earlier had died, and the air was still. Thoughts started to intrude into Hveðrungr’s silence. Perhaps they should have taken advantage of the wind earlier, even if it wasn’t quite enough. The sounds were getting awfully close. Had he let the perfect be the enemy of the good?

However, as each thought tried to make itself heard, he quietly muffled them in his mind. Hveðrungr smothered them with a lack of doubt. He had silenced his emotions and simply continued to observe his surroundings without

comment.

“Hey! Um, they’re getting a bit close for comfort now, aren’t they?!”
Haugspori asked with a hint of anxiety, nearing his own limit.

True, they were close to the limit of how much they could wait. The sounds made it clear that the cannonade would soon reach this area as well. But soon was the operative word.

“It’s not much, but we still have time,” Hveðrungr replied.

“There are times in which a general needs to be able to abandon the goal that seems just within reach. Isn’t this one of those times? Please think calmly!”
Haugspori exclaimed.

“Haugspori, you’re the one who needs to calm down,” Hveðrungr said bluntly.

“Huh?”

“Judgments made under pressure aren’t reliable. We decided on a line to retreat earlier, remember? They haven’t gotten there yet.”

“Oh, right!”

Haugspori widened his eyes in understanding and turned his eyes to the building that had been chosen as the marker. It was indeed still standing.

“You’re right that adaptability is important for dealing with unexpected developments, but when there are things we can anticipate, it’s best to plan for them ahead of time. That’s the best way to secure victory,” Hveðrungr explained.

In war, it was necessary to make quick judgments in succession. It would be ideal if the individual in command could adapt to changing circumstances and always make the right decision, but there were limits to the ability for the human mind to process such changes. Under pressure, people’s perspectives tended to become myopic, and they made mistakes.

For that reason, Hveðrungr preferred to plan for as many contingencies as he could anticipate ahead of time and choose between those contingencies when required. He believed that was the best way to reduce the number of judgment errors. A modern application of Hveðrungr’s theory of thinking was the use of

stop-loss lines in stock trading—the act of setting prices to sell and buy at ahead of time based on calm, rational decision-making and to follow those rules even in crises. It was commonly cited in pop business books as a surefire way to win as an investor.

“Ah! Uncle! It’s coming!” Kristina yelled excitedly.

Finally, his patience had paid off. Upon hearing Kristina’s signal, Hveðrungr stood up and waved his hand.

“Now’s the time! Let fly!” he yelled.

“Fire!”

At Ran’s command, the cannons set up along the Flame Clan’s front line opened fire in a thundering volley. The lead cannonballs leaped out of the guns and, in a blink of an eye, demolished the houses two hundred meters away with a shattering din. They destroyed one block of houses. Then another. Then another. They made short work of the adobe construction.

“Quite the sight, isn’t it?!” Nobunaga exclaimed as he nodded in satisfaction. There was a certain satisfaction that came with destroying something. Even in the modern era, a company had made a fortune by marketing a piece of paper that made a satisfying tearing noise as a stress relief tool. Here, however, Nobunaga wasn’t just tearing paper; he was destroying two hundred years of history. This was an indulgence that only a conqueror bringing about a new age had the opportunity to enjoy.

“Hm?”

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw objects arcing toward them from deep within Glaðsheimr. Nobunaga reacted quickly with his orders. “Ah, yes, the Steel Clan’s giant catapults. Tell the troops to watch for enemy fire from above!”

Unlike cannons, projectiles from catapults arced through the air as they flew to their target. In practical terms, it meant that those on the receiving end had time to get themselves out of the path of the boulder while it was still airborne. They were devastatingly effective against immobile walls, but they were no

threat to soldiers who could simply move out of their way.

“What?!” Nobunaga yelled in apparent confusion. The Steel Clan’s projectiles had landed, but rather than the huge crash expected of a boulder impact, the sound of objects shattering against the ground instead rang through the air, prompting Nobunaga to furrow his brow questioningly. Similarly, a number of Flame Clan soldiers began to voice their confusion over what had just occurred.

“Ugh, what the heck is this...?! Wait, is it wine?!”

“They’re throwing wine at us?!”

“Urgh, this is some strong stuff. The smell is overpowering.”

“What are they trying to do? Get us drunk?”

“Hah! The smell alone isn’t enough to get us drunk.”

Nobunaga heard the derisive laughter from his soldiers. Had Nobunaga been aware of one simple fact, he might have been able to prevent what was about to happen. That would have been asking too much of him, however. Even Nobunaga had no way of learning about things that simply didn’t exist in his time, and as such, he did nothing as the Steel Clan catapults continued launching bottles full of spirits, drenching the area in alcohol. Still at a loss, the soldiers conversed among themselves.

“Dammit, the cannons are soaked with wine.”

“Are they trying to ruin the gunpowder inside?”

“Why wouldn’t they just use water, then?”

“Who knows, they’re all a bit weird. Could they be offering this as a sign of surrender?”

“If they were doing that, I’m sure they’d just bring it out properly.”

“Yeah, true. Right then, let’s send them some metal balls in return,” one soldier suggested.

“Good plan. Hey! Bring a fuse!” another, who appeared to be his superior, responded.

“Yes sir!”

At that command, a soldier approached one of the cannons—and the air instantly caught fire. The flames quickly spread, engulfing the soldiers around the cannon.

“Gaaaaah!”

“Hot! Hoooot!”

“Ahhh! Water! WATER!”

The panicked screams of the soldiers echoed through the Flame Clan ranks.

“What?! What is going on?!” Even Nobunaga was caught staring in shock. To him, it appeared that the area had been instantly enveloped in a ball of flame. This confused him all the more when he recalled that they had taken every precaution against accidental fires when first setting up their cannons. There shouldn’t have been anything flammable anywhere near them. Of course, Nobunaga hadn’t known, and had no way of knowing, that highly concentrated alcohol was not only flammable, but evaporated quickly in open air and permeated the air around it.

During the Warring States Period in Japan, the only alcohol available had been clear and cloudy sake—brewed rice wines. While Nobunaga was said to be the first Japanese man to taste wine, even it only had at most fifteen percent alcohol by volume. Distilled spirits had existed in southern Kyushu in the form of shochu, but their spread to Honshu would only happen in the Edo Period. There was no way Nobunaga could have possibly been aware of distilled spirits, let alone their possible offensive uses.

Crucially, this was a piece of knowledge that Nobunaga lacked, but Yuuto was aware of. This was why Yuuto had employed this tactic; it allowed him to exploit a knowledge gap in his favor. The liquid that the Steel Clan had bombarded the Flame Clan Army with was a pure spirit that had been distilled to the absolute limit. It was at just over ninety-six percent pure alcohol by volume. In essence, it was almost pure ethanol.

The bottles launched at the cannons had shattered upon impact with the ground, and the alcohol had quickly evaporated, filling the air with alcohol vapors. The slow match immediately lit the air on fire.

The Steel Clan, however, wasn't finished. The catapults followed up the bottles of alcohol with earthenware urns. When they shattered against the ground, they released a foul-smelling black liquid that immediately fed the flames.

"This is rock water, is it not?!" Nobunaga immediately identified the stench that wafted over the smell of the alcohol. It was rock water—essentially crude oil. There was, in fact, an oil field in Japan in the province of Echigo, modern Niigata Prefecture, and the substance had been known as burning water as far back as the Nara Period.

As he saw the next volley of urns arc through the air, even Nobunaga couldn't hold back a shiver of dread. If those were filled with rock water—and if they landed in the middle of this conflagration—the results would be horrific. His mind immediately worked out how his forces would fare in such an event, but reality one-upped even his vivid imagination.

Arrows cut through the air and shattered the urns mid-flight. The arrows hadn't been fired by Flame Clan soldiers. No, it had been Steel Clan archers taking those shots. The rock water inside the urns burst forth as they shattered, showering a wide area. The Steel Clan continued to launch ever more of them into the air, shattering them with their arrows mid-flight each time. Though some of the arrows missed, most of the urns were successfully destroyed. Rock water rained down onto the entire area, and the flames spread in the blink of an eye—engulfing the Flame Clan forces.

"Retreat! Retreat!"

The wall of flame that burned like a vengeful hydra was too much even for Nobunaga to deal with. The only option he had under the circumstances was to run as quickly from the flames as possible. As he did so, however...

"Tch. Old age is a terrible foe," he remarked. While he still maintained an impressive physique for his age, he was still over sixty. Even he couldn't avoid losing a step or two from age. His body refused to obey him in the same way it had done in his youth.

"The lad certainly got me this time," Nobunaga thought to himself.

At this point, Nobunaga had a vague idea of the mechanics behind the Steel Clan's attack. It was only a hypothesis based on what had transpired, but the wine the enemy had launched was flammable. It was difficult enough to believe that liquid, much less wine, would burn, but what was even more unexpected was the fact that the scent of sufficiently strong wine itself would burn.

Being unaware of this had led to his soldiers bringing an open flame to the wine-soaked ground and set off the massive fire that was currently engulfing his forces. Had they started with rock water, that is, a form of oil, Nobunaga would have been on guard. He would have probably immediately ordered any open flames to be put out. However, the Steel Clan had instead used wine. He hadn't been able to figure out what they were planning, and it had slowed his reaction to their attack. He had let them soak the area with it while he had stayed on the front to watch. Those few minutes had been fatal for his men, and could, too, have been for him.

"Blast. The flames are moving quickly..." Nobunaga clicked his tongue bitterly as he ran. As the countless scars on his body attested, Nobunaga preferred to lead from the front, regardless of his importance as the army's supreme commander, as well as clan patriarch. Doing so allowed him to react quickly to enemy movements while bolstering the morale of his forces. However, that preference had worked against him this time. Because he was so deep into enemy territory, it would take time for him to get back to relative safety. Worse, the flames had spooked the horses and they had fled, forcing him to escape on foot. He had no choice but to force his aching bones forward.

"I will not stand for this! I am Oda Nobunaga!"

Nobunaga forced his body to obey with his overpowering strength of will, and he increased the pace of his running even as his lungs and flanks ached from the effort. He could see the city gate in the distance. As he made his escape, however, a sharp pain pierced his chest, and he broke out in a fit of coughing. The strength left his knees. It seemed he had pushed himself too far.

"My Great Lord! Are you okay?!" Ran appeared to lend him a shoulder, having hurried to his side after seeing Nobunaga stumble. Ran then continued running, dragging Nobunaga along, but of course, his pace slowed as a result of the extra burden. The raging flames cared little about their plight, and the fire's fangs

lashed out to swallow Nobunaga.

“Cough, cough... At this rate, it’ll catch us...” Nobunaga stated.

“I’ll make sure it won’t! Beg your pardon, My Lord!”

Ran swept Nobunaga off his feet and picked him up, evidently deciding that it would be faster. However, the flames were still faster than Ran. The wind was siding with the fire, blowing in the direction of the Flame Clan. The fact that the Steel Clan had held off on their attack for so long must have meant they had been waiting for the right moment. They had been waiting for the finicky winds to blow in their favor. Nobunaga could do nothing but tip his hat in salute to their masterful planning.

“Ran, enough. Get out of here while you can...” Nobunaga asked his Second.

“I’m afraid I won’t be doing that! This is one time I can’t obey even your words!” Ran responded in outright refusal.

Nobunaga blinked in surprise. His mouth was agape in shock. Ran was an extremely loyal subordinate. He had never—not even once—disobeyed Nobunaga’s orders. Ran was a man who, if Nobunaga said something was white, would call something that was quite clearly black...no, would paint that black thing white. And yet now, even if it was to save his lord’s life, he had refused Nobunaga’s direct command.

“If I abandon you here, I won’t be able to face my parents or my brothers!” Ran shouted as he continued running. His back caught fire as the flames lapped at them.

“Ran! Enough! Enough, so...”

“Please be quiet! You’ll bite your tongue! Ahhhhh!”

Ran kept running despite the fact that his back was on fire. He let out a primal roar and continued to run. His expression was set in grim determination and fueled by adrenaline. He ran and ran until, finally, he passed through the city gate and had outrun the flames.

“Guh...” Having expended all his strength, Ran collapsed. His back was burning, both figuratively and literally.

“M-My apologies, My Great Lord. Are you unhurt?” Ran asked. The only person he was concerned about was Nobunaga. To trip at the very end and end up injuring his liege lord would have been unforgivable. In Ran’s eyes, that would have been a mortifying mistake.

“Fool! Worry about yourself first!” Nobunaga shouted, taking off his cloak and beginning beating Ran’s back with it. He was probably trying to put out the fire. Ran felt apologetic for making his lord do such a thing.

“M-My Great Lord... Y-You’ll ruin your favorite cloak...” Ran nervously stated.

“You damned fool! I like you far more than I like this damned cloak!” Nobunaga barked in rebuttal.

“Heh... You do me too much honor.” Ran felt an intense glow of satisfaction upon hearing those words. The burns on his back were excruciating, but they felt so insignificant at the moment. To him, Nobunaga was everything.

“My Great Lord! Are you okay?!” Ran asked, looking increasingly concerned for his lord’s well-being.

“I’m fine. Ran... I’ve put out the flames, but, well...”

“Ah?! Second?!” one of the soldiers who had rushed to help the pair yelled.

“Th-Those are terrible burns! F-Fetch the healer! Quickly! Second, please hold on!” another exclaimed.

The nearby soldiers fell into a panic as they saw the extent of Ran’s injuries. He couldn’t tell for himself, but it sounded as though they were quite serious. Honno-ji, the bomb from the other day, this flame—it seemed he had awful luck when it came to fire. But all of the wounds he had suffered had been to protect Nobunaga. As such, Ran had no regrets.

“What are you standing around for?! Hurry!” Nobunaga yelled.

Ran heard the strain in Nobunaga’s voice. This was probably the most anxious he had ever heard his liege lord. Even at Honno-ji, Nobunaga had laughed it off with a predatory grin. In stark contrast, Nobunaga was worried for Ran’s life. Ran almost wept in gratitude. It was more than enough. He couldn’t keep Nobunaga here any longer.

“M-My Great Lord! L-Leave me and return to command! The soldiers are in a panic. You’re the only one who can restore order. I-If the enemy attacked us now, they might very well destroy us entirely!” Ran pleaded to Nobunaga with a determined expression, tightly grasping his arm. He had spent his life working to make Nobunaga the conqueror of the world. It would haunt him into his next life if Nobunaga failed on his account.

Nobunaga seemed to pull himself together in an instant. Although he often appeared to be ruthless, he was a compassionate individual, and because of that, there were times he let his emotions drive him, causing him to make mistakes. When he razed Mount Hiei’s Enryaku-ji Temple, the act had been driven by a desire to avenge his kin and his retainers, but doing so had given his enemies an excuse to band together and encircle him in an attempt to contain him. In this case, however, Nobunaga had already regained his composure. As such, there was nothing left for Ran to worry about.

“Don’t you dare die, Ran! It’s far too early for you to die!” Nobunaga ordered.

“Of course, I won’t, my Great Lord. I haven’t seen you conquer the world yet,” Ran replied.

Ran forced himself to smile and watched Nobunaga depart. He was telling the truth—he had no intention of dying. He would will himself to live with everything he had. He hadn’t completed his duty, and there was no one else who could properly support Nobunaga. For that reason alone, he couldn’t die. Not yet.

“Daddy! Are you okay?!” When Nobunaga returned to the main camp located outside of Glāðsheimr, he was immediately pounced on by Homura. She was supposed to be in the rear echelon creating saltpeter, but she had probably rushed over, worried about Nobunaga, when she saw the flames rising from the Holy Capital.

“I’m fine. Ran made sure of that,” Nobunaga replied in an effort to comfort his concerned daughter.

“Ran did? O-Okay,” she replied and furrowed her brow. She wasn’t particularly fond of Ran. If anything, she disliked him. That said, it wasn’t that

she disliked his personality, she was simply jealous that Ran was constantly at her beloved father's side.

"I'm sorry, but I can't spare time for you at the moment, my darling," Nobunaga replied, patting Homura's head apologetically, before getting on with the task at hand. "What's the situation?" Nobunaga asked the officer who had been in command of the main camp.

"There's too much confusion for a detailed report, but from the soldiers who somehow escaped, it appears many of the men who had been at the front were swallowed by those flames..." he replied.

"Fool. I was there, I know that full well. I'm asking if there's been any movement by the Steel Clan," Nobunaga asked bluntly.

"What? No, surely they have their hands full with the fire..."

"You imbecile!" Nobunaga ripped into the officer. There was nothing more meaningless than sticking with common-sense assumptions when the enemy was completely unbound by them.

"There's a good chance they'll use this opportunity to attack! Tell the sentries to keep their eyes peeled for any changes!" Nobunaga barked at the officer.

"...I-In that huge conflagration?!" the officer turned to look at Glaðsheimr and asked, still skeptical. The flames were burning so powerfully that they seemed they'd reach the heavens themselves. It looked like they would consume the entire city at any moment. Surely, the officer's expression said, the Steel Clan wouldn't just let the fire burn and attack.

"Your mindset is exactly what he's trying to exploit. Hurry and reorganize the main forces with those who can move!" Nobunaga announced curtly and issued his orders. The boy he was facing had a plan for everything. He wasn't stupid enough to die in a trap of his own making. It was a virtual certainty that he had already accounted for dealing with the fire, meaning he would soon be going on the offensive. Unsurprisingly, Nobunaga's guess was right. At that very moment...

"Right! It's high time we made our move!" Yuuto announced to his assembled

generals in the heart of Glaðsheimr.

“According to Kristina’s report, we were able to catch a good number of their soldiers along with their cannons. There’s no way we can miss this opportunity,” he continued.

“Under these circumstances, Your Majesty?” Fagrahvél asked and furrowed her brow skeptically. She wasn’t the only one looking at him in apparent disbelief—at least half of the other generals seemed to share her doubts. Yuuto was well aware of what they were thinking.

“Don’t worry about the fire. It won’t reach the Valaskjálf Palace,” he said confidently. The generals who had been with him since his days in the Wolf Clan, as well as with Horn Clan officers, seemed convinced, but those who had only been under his command for the last year or so were less confident in his claims.

“May I ask why?” Fagrahvél inquired as their representative.

“We don’t have the time, so I’ll explain it simply. For fire to burn, it needs three things. Air, fuel, and a high enough temperature,” Yuuto replied as he listed off the items on his fingers.

“Remarkable! So such knowledge is available in the land beyond the heavens?!” Fagrahvél said, eyes wide with admiration. It was understandable. While combustion was one of the most basic lessons taught in sixth-grade chemistry, it had only been discovered in the 18th century—over three thousand years after the people in this room were born.

“It is, yeah. So, as I was saying... What’s important is that if any of those three items are missing, fire can’t burn. It goes out. This is an absolute.” Yuuto emphasized the word “absolute” and the room went quiet.

Soon after, however, the generals let out a loud cheer.

Yuuto had expected some surprise, but the reaction was more emphatic than he had expected, and he blinked in surprise. To him, it had simply been knowledge that he had learned as an elementary school student. For the people of Yggdrasil, however, it was something else entirely. Fire brought them many benefits—warmth, cooking, forging—but it was also a constant threat. There

was little humans could do against raging fire. To possess the know-how to extinguish even the most intense of fires at will was nothing short of incredible to them.

“You shouldn’t be *that* surprised by it. You do the same thing,” Yuuto scratched at his cheek awkwardly as he told the room. He couldn’t help but feel a bit embarrassed at them giving him credit for something he had learned as a child.

“We do?” they asked, confused.

“Yeah. What do you do when a fire happens? You usually break down the buildings near it, right?”

“Yes, well, that’s true...” Fagrahvél nodded and replied after a moment’s thought.

There was no such thing as fire hoses in this era, and because water containers were all ceramic, bucket relays were also out of the question. As a result, almost all firefighting in Yggdrasil consisted of creating firebreaks. It worked by destroying any buildings that were near or downwind of a fire and starving the fire’s ability to spread.

“You’re putting out the fire by removing one of the elements—that is, the object to burn—from the picture,” Yuuto explained.

“Oh, I see!” Fagrahvél nodded as the fact dawned on her.

“My solution is pretty much the same. By removing the things that can burn around the fire ahead of time, the fire won’t spread past it. Meaning it’ll stay in southern Glaðsheimr.”

He was applying the concept of a permanent firebreak between regions of a city. The idea seemed obvious: just avoid putting fuel in the path of fire. However, it was an idea that only seemed obvious in hindsight. For example, during the Tokugawa Period, Edo, as the new capital of the Shogunate, experienced rapid development along with explosive growth in population density. As a result, fires became so common in Edo that the saying “Fires and quarrels are the flower of Edo” came to define the city for its population.

In spite of this fact, initially, the only real measures taken against fire had

been to push for buildings to be built with shingled roofing, dirt foundations, and lacquered, in an attempt to make the houses more fireproof. Unfortunately, these measures also tended to raise the cost of building, which slowed their adoption, which was why in the end, the Tokugawa government was forced to implement *hiyokechi* disaster parks—artificial firebreaks—over the objection of the city’s residents. The first of these open spaces weren’t commissioned until 1657, over half a century after the establishment of the Edo Shogunate.

“Fortunately, Glaðsheimr has the great streets that stretch into each cardinal direction, creating their own great fire walls thanks to their vast openness. They’re plenty wide, and Kristina tells me the wind will blow southward for a while, meaning the possibility of the fire spreading to Valaskjálf Palace is pretty much zero,” Yuuto continued, allaying the generals’ concerns.

Even if an unlucky gust pushed the flames northward, most of Glaðsheimr’s houses were made of non-flammable brick. A few embers from the fire in the south wouldn’t be enough to ignite them.

“Currently, most of the fire raging in the south comes from the spirits and oil we tossed in that direction. I’m sure there’s some clothing left in the houses and wood used for the furniture or rooftops that might be contributing to it, but it’s not enough to be worried about. The fire will probably run out of fuel soon and burn itself out.”

“I... I see.” Fagrahvél nodded as she replied, as though overwhelmed and convinced by the volume of Yuuto’s argument.

She probably didn’t fully understand what he was saying, but in situations like this, the image of credibility was more important than the logic. An air of confidence and a flood of words was usually rather convincing when the audience wasn’t fully knowledgeable on a subject. It was a common conman’s trick, but Yuuto wasn’t in a situation where he could spend too much time explaining the fine details.

“It’s also worth keeping in mind that, to most generals, the idea of riding out into a burning city would be a fool’s errand, right??”

“Well, of course—Oh!” Fagrahvél was about to voice her agreement when she

seemed to realize what Yuuto was trying to get at. Again, while she tended to be a bit lacking in political guile, she was still an extremely able commander.

“We’re facing Oda Nobunaga. He won’t fall for my schemes all that often. This is a golden opportunity for us. If we miss this chance, we’re going to be out of options.”

The sound of the officers swallowing was audible through the room as Yuuto bluntly made his assessment. They were aware of that fact. Even though they had turned the tide somewhat in their favor with the insurgency tactics and the fire, they were still clearly outnumbered by the Flame Clan Army. If things remained the way they were, Nobunaga was still going to slowly close the noose around their necks. They needed to take the fight to Nobunaga, even if it meant taking some risks. Yuuto waited for understanding and determination to spread through the ranks of the assembled generals before continuing.

“So, with all that said... Let’s get moving! Let’s show them that the only thing that awaits anyone that attacks us is death!”

ACT 4

Vassarfall was the first in the Flame Clan to notice the sudden change in the city. His forces were currently set up approximately a kilometer north of Glaðsheimr. Their placement to the north left Vassarfall's forces in a position to reinforce either the west, where the Steel Clan might bring reinforcements from Bifröst or Álfheimr, or the east, where the enemy might try to escape into Jötunheimr. It was an important role that required initiative on the commander's part, which was why Nobunaga had assigned this duty to Vassarfall, a member of the Flame Clan's Five Division Commanders and perhaps his best general. Even if an enemy were to attack him now, he would be able to hold his current position until the Flame Clan could reinforce him.

With seemingly no warning, Vassarfall stood up and called out to his soldiers. "Men! Get ready to fight!"

Although he wasn't an Einherjar, Vassarfall had honed his sense of hearing through a lifetime of intense training that put the senses of any Einherjar in Yggdrasil to shame. His practically supernatural sense of hearing had keyed him into the sounds of a force of over ten thousand rapidly approaching his position.

"Are you serious?!" his Second, Fluss, asked with a note of alarm. He had served with Vassarfall for over a decade, and Vassarfall had never been wrong when making this sort of observation. But even then, he still had to check.

"I am deadly serious. They truly are such inconsiderate fellows. We have been granted the opportunity to bear witness to a grand event—the burning of the Holy Capital! Why do these heathens wish to take this chance away from me? Why do the gods allow this sort of blasphemy?! Oh, the inhumanity! Why couldn't they have gone east or west?! Why must they come to me?!" Vassarfall lamented with a theatrical display of disappointment.

To a casual observer, it appeared that he was simply hamming it up, but Vassarfall meant every word. The pursuit of beauty was his life's purpose. To

him, commanding an army was secondary—something he did to pass the time as he sought out the next great work of art.

“Yes, yes. Time to come back to this world, sir. The enemy’s coming, right?” Fluss casually ignored Vassarfall’s theatrics and set the conversation back on course. He was thoroughly used to his commander’s eccentricities.

“You truly are a man who doesn’t appreciate sublimity...” Vassarfall responded.

“I’ll listen to whatever lectures you wish to give on the subject once the battle is over, so can you please focus on the battle for now?”

Vassarfall’s expression brightened at Fluss’s comment. The disappointment previously present upon his features quickly cleared away. Vassarfall understood he was a man who walked his own arduous path. As someone who wished to achieve his greatest goals, it was his fate to find himself doomed to solitude. He had made his peace with that years ago, but it was only human to want to be able to share his insights with another. Vassarfall was starved for the chance to share his sensibilities with like-minded individuals.

“You’ll hear whatever I have to say, you said?! I’ll hold you to that, Fluss! At the very least, we’re going to spend three days and nights talking about the sublime!” Vassarfall declared as he leaned forward. This was what made people avoid him in social situations, but he was completely oblivious to that fact. At the same time, it was this passion—this obsessive concentration—that served as the foundation for his impressive abilities.

“...I understand, and I promise I shall do so. Now, please, let’s get to work.”

The short pause was probably Fluss regretting his remark, but Vassarfall clearly didn’t notice as he nodded enthusiastically.

“All right then! A man’s word is sacred! It’s a promise! Wooo! I’m feeling inspired!” Vassarfall proclaimed.

“Well, that’s lovely,” Fluss replied as he let out a deep sigh, a thoroughly tired expression painted across his face.

He was a somewhat fussy man who was willing to serve as a sacrificial lamb for the sake of his clan and for his subordinates. Of course, he had no doubt

that the price he was going to pay was worth it. Despite the man himself claiming that fighting was simply a diversion from his true passion, Vassarfall was still one of the Flame Clan's Five Division Commanders, known to many as "Vassarfall, Master of Advance and Retreat." Their enemy was the Steel Clan led by Yuuto Suoh, a monster who had conquered half of Yggdrasil in a mere handful of years. Vassarfall was perhaps the only man currently present who could put up a decent fight against him.



A member of Vassarfall's unit gazed intently at the holy capital as it burned. He was young, perhaps in his early twenties. He was impressively built—possessing bulging muscles while still retaining a suppleness to his stance. His face was rugged, with a vertical scar over one eye, while the other glinted with the predatory sharpness of a hawk. A single glance showed that he was a man to be reckoned with.

His name was Hyuuga. He was a member of the five most powerful warriors in the Flame Clan, the Five Blades of the Flame Clan, and an aggressive general who led the vanguard within Vassarfall's Third Division, the force that most often served as the vanguard of the Flame Clan Army.

"I guess this is the end for the Holy Ásgarðr Empire and the Steel Clan. Not nearly as great as all the rumors made them out to be. That Suoh Yuuto is a disappointment too. I suppose everyone is when compared to the Great Lord." Hyuuga said and snorted with displeasure.

He was operating under the misapprehension that Nobunaga had set fire to the capital. To be clear, this wasn't because he was incompetent. It bears remembering that the Flame Clan still relied primarily on mounted messengers for communication. That meant there was always some time lag in communications, and a messenger had yet to reach him. Then there was the fact that no sane defender would set their own fortress on fire. The only time one might do so was because they were aware they had no chance of victory and did so to deny the enemy any spoils of war. With all those points in mind, it was perfectly reasonable for Hyuuga to have assumed the flames meant Glaðsheimr had fallen.

"Wish they would've put up more of a fight," he said with an irritated click of his tongue.

Hyuuga was an extremely ambitious man. He had secured his place as Vassarfall's Assistant Second by aggressively pursuing results in the wars against the Wind, Lightning, Bow, and Spear Clans. And yet, this time, both at Gjallarbrú Fortress and the siege of Glaðsheimr, he had been reduced to forming part of the envelopment with no real chance to engage in battle. While there was no dishonor in serving as part of an encircling army, because of his youth and his

pride in his own strength, it appeared as a complete waste of an opportunity to prove himself.

“Assistant Second! A message from Father! ‘The enemy approaches. Prepare to defend with all alacrity!’”

“Oh?”

Hyuuga’s brow twitched in curiosity at the messenger’s words. Vassarfall’s ears were special. If he said the enemy was coming, then it was most certainly true.

“Bad luck on their part, to run directly into our path,” Hyuuga stated as he grabbed his beloved spear and grinned a predatory grin. While he was one of the Five Blades of the Flame Clan, unlike Shiba, who was the First Blade, Hyuuga had no interest in mastering the art of fighting or searching for worthy opponents. Battle was simply a means to his own promotion. He had no reason to fear a fleeing enemy—they simply served as great prey for him to rack up kills from. The thought had not occurred to Hyuuga that the enemy was highly disciplined and motivated, ready to pounce upon his forces with murderous intent.

“The enemy’s charging in without slowing down!” one of Hyuuga’s men reported.

“They’re planning to try to break through our lines? Hah! They underestimate the Third Division. Tanegashima companies, get in position!”

Hyuuga immediately issued his orders. Arquebuses showed their true value not in offense but in defense. That was because rearming them required that the wielder stop and spend time reloading. That was a critical flaw when needing to charge toward an enemy, but it wasn’t a particularly glaring issue when they were used in defense. There was no need to move when defending, so a gunner could stand behind a barricade and take their time.

Based on the attacking force’s current distance, the tanegashima companies would have time for two full volleys. It would land a devastating blow to the enemy’s front line while slowing their advance. It was an extremely rational plan—or so it would have been, if he weren’t fighting against Suoh Yuuto.

“Fire!”

The arquebuses rumbled as they lashed out with their tongues of flame. The sound of their retorts echoed so loudly that Hyuuga felt the vibrations where he stood. As the thunder of the arquebuses receded—

“The enemy isn’t slowing at all! They’re showing no sign of hesitation as they charge!”

“Wha?!”

Hyuuga was shocked by his scout’s report. His enemies had always been utterly overwhelmed with fear when they were faced with the devastating power, range, and sound of the tanegashima volleys. It was completely beyond his comprehension to be witnessing an enemy force who appeared to be completely unfazed by the attack.

“Inconceivable!”

“They had been too distant for us to see it earlier, but the enemy soldiers are pushing a line of wagons as they advance! I believe those wagons stopped the bullets!”

“Whaaat?!” Hyuuga raised his voice in annoyance. Nobunaga was thorough in his intelligence gathering, and Hyuuga himself had been informed about the fact that the Steel Clan used wagons as temporary fortifications. But he had assumed that the wagons were made of wood, which had led him to draw the conclusion that while they might stop arrows, they’d splinter and break against arquebuses.

Yuuto had made sure to reinforce those assumptions. In this era, it was impossible to know detailed information about foreign clans. While it had become rather public knowledge that the Steel Clan achieved victory with the revolutionary use of wagons, there was no way to know the precise construction details of the wagons. In a stroke of genius, Yuuto had purposefully left several wheelbarrows for the Flame Clan to capture to give them the impression that the Steel Clan’s wagons were all made of wood.

However, the actual wagons used for combat were all iron-clad. They were also filled with sand and gravel. Even arquebuses couldn’t easily penetrate their

defenses. The whole concept of lining up wagons and wheeled vehicles to serve as wagon walls had, in fact, been originally developed as a defensive measure against firearms. Of course, Hyuuga had no way of knowing such a thing.

“Tch. Try again! I’m sure a second barrage will slow them!” Hyuuga snarled out the words, as though trying to convince himself. It bore repeating, but Hyuuga wasn’t incompetent. He wasn’t an overly aggressive and reckless buffoon, but someone who spent long nights studying the numerous war manuals that had been translated by Ran. He was eager to challenge himself with new pursuits, enthusiastically took on work, and put in three times the effort of most, and perhaps most impressively, he had an extraordinary amount of combat experience for a man his age. The Flame Clan leadership considered him to be an important asset to the future of the clan. It was just that in this case, he was up against an opponent that was wholly superior to him.

“No effect! They won’t stop! They’re right in front of us!”

“I see that! Tanegashima companies, pull back! Spear companies forward!”

Hyuuga shouted out the orders with a sense of urgency. By creating a wall of infantry wielding long spears, they would be able to create an impenetrable wall of spears. It was one of the basic formations that the Flame Clan employed based on tactics Nobunaga had developed in the Land of the Rising Sun—

“A-Ahhh!”

The terrified screams of Flame Clan soldiers rang out from the front lines. The wagons filled with sand had plowed into their formation, having gained speed and momentum from traveling downhill. The reason Yuuto had chosen the northern gate, rather than the east—which would have been easier to escape from—or the west—which would have made it easier to rendezvous with reinforcements—was because the northern side of the city had a gentle downhill slope. There was no way for the spearmen to stop the hurtling wagons with just their spears. Their weapons either broke under the strain or the men were thrown aside by the sheer weight of the wagons. The wagons easily broke through the barricades, hit or ran over a large number of soldiers, and finally came to a stop. That wasn’t the end of their struggles, however...

“Maidens of the Waves, attack!”

From several of the wagons appeared several powerful warriors, each one a legendary figure worth dozens of men in their own right. Hyuuga's men were professional soldiers rather than conscripted peasants—they had no farming obligations, and as such, were elites that spent each day drilling. Despite that, they were no use against opponents like these. They were scythed down like wheat by the Maidens of the Waves. Then came the rank and file members of the Steel Clan Army.

“Tch! Get out of the way! I'll deal with this!” Hyuuga grabbed his spear and leaped into the fray. He fought bravely, going so far as to wound two of the Maidens of the Waves, but he was only one man against many more.

“The enemy general, Hyuuga, has been slain!” one of the Maidens yelled proudly, thrusting his severed head high into the air. The Steel Clan Army's momentum increased, and they continued their assault against the Flame Clan's Third Division.

“I bring word. Lady Erna has taken the head of the enemy general Hyuuga!” the messenger reported.

“Wonderful! Well done!” Yuuto replied.

Yuuto let out a cheer at the good news. He gripped his hand into a fist knowing that this gave his forces the momentum they needed, but it didn't seem that it was all good news...

“However, Your Majesty...”

“What is it?”

The messenger's expression clouded and Yuuto furrowed his brow. He had a bad feeling about this.

“Lady Erna and Lady Hrönn have been wounded and must withdraw from the fighting.”

“Those two?!” He couldn't help but exclaim in surprise.

Erna and Hrönn weren't any ordinary Einherjar. They were considered two of the three strongest warriors of the Sword Clan's elite force, the Maidens of the

Waves. As far as their combat prowess was concerned, they were far stronger than Yuuto's bodyguard Felicia. For them to be wounded to the point of needing to withdraw was an extraordinary circumstance indeed.

"Are they in danger of dying?!" Yuuto asked frantically.

"I'm told it's nothing that should be fatal, but their injuries are too serious for them to continue fighting," the messenger responded.

Yuuto bit down on his lower lip with a sigh. It wasn't the worst-case scenario, as the two of them didn't have life-threatening injuries, but having two highly talented front line commanders out of the fight was still a painful loss.

"Tch. I suppose I should have expected this from someone as utilitarian as Oda Nobunaga. He has some talented men serving under him," Yuuto spat with a sour click of his tongue. He wasn't simply referring to Hyuuga. If anything, he was more focused on the man in overall command of the northern forces. "Based on the standards, it's the Third Division... So, the Fafnir again..."

This was the same opponent he had faced in the earlier urban fighting within Glaðsheimr. While he had won that battle, the enemy commander had retreated as soon as he realized he was cornered, and he had skillfully frustrated Yuuto's attempts to whittle their forces down, organizing a retreat that had kept the Flame Clan's losses to a minimum.

This time, Yuuto had taken the initiative through the wagon wall charge and the rapid introduction of a large Einherjar force in the form of the Maidens of the Waves, and he had built on that momentum by killing one of the Third Division's notable commanders. Yet through all that, the enemy was somehow maintaining their lines.

Ordinarily in war, once a side had gained a decisive advantage in a battle, the momentum would snowball in their favor, while the opposing side's morale would collapse. To maintain an army's morale and order under those circumstances was extremely challenging. It was what marked someone like Vassarfall as a great general.

"'Master of Advance and Retreat' indeed..." Yuuto said with a sigh.

Certainly, Vassarfall's command of his forces lived up to his reputation. The

outcome of this battle depended on whether or not he could finish off the Third Division before the Flame Clan forces positioned to the east and the west could reinforce them. If they weren't able to win by then, there was a chance the Steel Clan forces would end up surrounded and at a disadvantage. There wasn't much time to spare. But, evidently, this was an opponent who wouldn't fold easily.

"This is not ideal..."

Meanwhile, in the Flame Clan's ranks, Vassarfall, like Yuuto, had his expression furrowed in a frown. He thought he had made the best possible preparations for an enemy attack by installing barricades, positioning his valuable tanegashima companies behind them, and assigning Hyuuga, one of the Five Blades of the Flame Clan and a veteran general, in command of them. Despite his best efforts, however, when the enemy had actually appeared, the wagon charge easily broke through the barricades, and Hyuuga had quickly been slain. While no plan survived first contact with the enemy, things had gone further off the rails than Vassarfall had predicted.

"They're ludicrously fast as always. And accurate. I hate to admit this about an enemy, but this is sublime."

Vassarfall shrugged his shoulders and let out a sigh of admiration for Suoh Yuuto, the enemy commander. It had been the same when he had walked into the kill zone of the city of Glaðsheimr, but the enemy responded extremely quickly to his own movements. Each time he would try a tactic to try to reverse the course of the battle, the enemy rapidly disrupted it without a moment's hesitation. It was enough to make him believe in precognition.

"This isn't the time to be admiring their work! You need to think of something..." Fluss, his Second, pleaded in a panic.

"It's as you say, but this is a tad much for me to handle alone..." Vassarfall replied as he scratched at the back of his head in thought. If the enemy were to overcommit because they had the advantage, or if they moved too quickly, he'd at least have some way to respond, but they were too well-disciplined and fast to leave any openings for him to exploit.

“He’s two, maybe three steps above me. He’s simply in a different tier from me. I can see why they call him a god of war,” Vassarfall stated. He casually accepted his defeat and shrugged his shoulders. Even if they had faced off on equal terms rather than having allowed the Steel Clan to grab the initiative, he probably would have lost anyway. The reality, of course, was that the battle had started with the momentum already on his enemy’s side. There was no way he could win. His children pinned their hopes on Vassarfall, but he knew he was out of options.

“Of course, even if winning isn’t possible, there still remain ways to fight under these challenging circumstances,” Vassarfall said with a smirk. He had given up on winning on his own—meaning it was time for his forces, the Third Division, to focus on defense, and win using the strength of others. The Flame Clan not only had the twenty thousand soldiers here on the north end, but there were also twenty thousand in the west, twenty thousand in the east, and forty thousand with the main body to the south. The southern forces would probably take too long to reach the Third Division’s location, but the distance to the northern forces from the western and eastern forces wasn’t that large. If they could hold out long enough, Flame Clan reinforcements could catch the Steel Clan forces in a pincer movement.

“No need to get greedy. If there’s a fish that you can see but can’t catch, the best thing to do is ignore it,” Vassarfall said with a triumphant grin. If he made an effort to win the battle now, he risked the enemy exploiting his desperation to corner him further. By all accounts, it was better to simply give up on winning for the time being and stall the Steel Clan’s advance upon them. The correct decision right now was to hold out, even if it wasn’t going to be the easiest thing to do. That was the conclusion he had come to through all of his calculations.

While most impressions of Vassarfall tended to focus on his extraordinary sense of hearing, his most impressive trait as a commander was his ability to completely discard any personal feelings and stick to strictly objective analysis.

Nobunaga was going out of his way to reward his subordinates in this war. Vassarfall had already been rewarded with Ingrid’s glass goblet, but of course, he was far from satisfied with that acquisition. There were plenty of other

things he wanted. The thing he wanted more than anything else was Ingrid herself. How lovely it would be to receive her as a reward for his accomplishments and have her craft art for him and him alone. The mere thought was enough to make him salivate. However, Vassarfall was not a man who let his greed warp his decision-making. He was unaffected by his emotions and would always choose the best option that was available to him. It sounded simple, but it wasn't something most could accomplish.

So, why was Vassarfall capable of doing so? That was because he believed that to do so was the most beautiful and sublime embodiment of a general. He was willing to sacrifice anything for the sake of the sublime. That was exactly why Nobunaga gave Vassarfall the Third Division, putting him ahead in seniority of Kuuga of the Fifth Division and Old Man Salk of the Fourth Division.

"Shall we drown in the mud together, Suoh Yuuto? Not to worry, the truly sublime still shines within the mud." Vassarfall chanted, practically singing the words with a theatrical flair. When both generals were cornered, who would continue to make the right decisions? Who would remain the most sublime? Exploring that question was, in itself, another exploration of the sublime.

"Heh. It's exciting to think of the sublimity that is to come," Vassarfall said with great anticipation in his voice.

It was like how a modern shogi master was obsessed with exquisite layouts of pieces on the board. Vassarfall was willing to find a way to pursue the sublime, to enjoy the moment, even as he was in a life-threatening situation. It was clearly not the thought pattern of an ordinary man. It was what marked him, like his liege and his opponent, as a great man of history.

The battle of northern Glaðsheimr had been raging for nearly an hour. The Steel Clan remained at an advantage.

"Advance! Advance!"

The one commanding the forces at the very front was Thír, first of the Maidens of the Waves. While she appeared to be in her mid-twenties, she was already over forty years of age. She, of course, had plentiful combat experience, and given her skill with herding the often unpredictable Einherjar in battle,

Yuuto had placed her in command of the Steel Clan Army's front line.

A roar rose from the ranks at Thír's encouragement. Slaying Hyuuga of the Five Blades of the Flame Clan had given an enormous boost to the Steel Clan Army's morale. The visible sign of their advantage encouraged the troops, and the army's momentum grew significantly. They quickly began to break the Flame Clan Army's formation from the center. They finally broke not only Hyuuga's first wave, but the second wave of defense too.

"Hm?"

Awaiting them beyond the quickly breaking lines of the second wave of defenders was a group of enemy archers. The twang of bowstrings rang out as arrows flew mercilessly at them.

"Useless! Sweep them out of the sky!" Thír yelled out.

Upon her instruction, the soldiers lifted their long spears from the ground, pointed them into the air, and began waving them from side to side. It was the basic defense against arrows for a phalanx formation. Still, it wasn't quite enough to stop the entire barrage.

"Guh!"

"Urgh!"

"Ahh!"

Most of the arrows were successfully deflected and safely clattered to the ground, or were deflected by armor and shields, but a handful of arrows pierced the bodies of Steel Clan soldiers. Thankfully, the Steel Clan Army had enough momentum that it was barely slowed by the arrows.

They let out a battle cry and charged into the third group of defenders. The two armies once again clashed. The Steel Clan, as before, emerged victorious from the shoving match. Because they had already been at speed, they had more momentum than the defenders. Had they been fighting any other clan, the Steel Clan's advantage in spear reach would have let them push through the enemy defenses. However, the Flame Clan's soldiers were also equipped with spears that were nearly twice the length of standard spears. Furthermore, they had managed to weaken some of the Steel Clan Army's momentum with the

arrow barrage. The Steel Clan ranks weren't able to fully break through the enemy lines, and the battle slowed into a melee.

"Tch."

Thír chewed at her thumb in irritation. While the two armies were locked in close quarters, the Steel Clan still held the advantage, and they were slowly pushing forward. At this rate, they would eventually break through the Flame Clan Army's ranks. Eventually wasn't good enough though. Yuuto had given Thír specific instructions to quickly take out the commander of the northern army so as to avoid being exposed to a flanking attack by enemy reinforcements. She was fighting more against time than she was against the army in front of her.

"The lack of Erna and Hrönn hurts under these circumstances."

While all of the Maidens of the Waves were elites that were handpicked and trained by Thír, Erna, with her powerful legs, and Hrönn, with her exceptional arm strength, were particularly useful for breaking stalemates like the present situation.

"No point in pining for spilled milk. Læva! Uðr! Go charge in! Do as much damage as you can."

"Yes ma'am!"

"Understood!"

She sent two of her subordinates who had been standing in wait next to her. Their abilities were better suited to defense, but she wasn't in a position to be choosy. Right now, what they needed was the force to be able to break through to the enemy's command area, which meant the only thing she could do was throw in all of her forces. Would they succeed?

"We've broken through the enemy formation!"

"Good!"

Thír gripped her hand into a fist upon hearing the good news. It was an unusually animated response for a woman that her protégés typically described behind her back as having more in common with marble statues than flesh and blood. That was just how important the report of breaking through the enemy

formation was to her.



“Now, continue on to the enemy—”

Thír’s words cut off in mid-sentence. Despite having broken through the enemy ranks, there was another enemy formation waiting for them beyond it. She felt a sense of *déjà vu* at the sight.

“What in the blazes is going on?!”

Despite breaking through formation after formation, they were no closer to the enemy’s commander. It was as though she was stuck in an endless loop...

Elsewhere, at around the same time, a messenger sent by Vassarfall had reached Nobunaga.

“The Steel Clan has engaged our northern forces. The enemy has a great deal of momentum. Our men require immediate reinforcements,” the messenger reported.

A murmur coursed through among the generals gathered. They weren’t surprised by the content of the message, but rather that Nobunaga had been prescient in expecting a Steel Clan attack.

“The northern forces, you say? I suppose that’s about right.”

They were situated in a position furthest from the main Flame Clan Army force in the south, and the terrain of the area featured a downward slope. It was the best place to attack.

“Have requests for reinforcements been sent to the western and eastern armies?” Nobunaga asked the messenger.

“Yes, of course, My Lord,” he replied.

“I see. While they’re not quite up to the standard of any of the commanders of the five divisions, they’re both competent leaders in their own rights. No doubt they’ve already started making their way to the north,” Nobunaga stated.

If those generals were so incompetent that they wouldn’t move under the circumstances, they had no value to Nobunaga. He would simply execute them and replace them. Although Nobunaga wasn’t some omnipotent deity and had no way of knowing, the western and eastern armies had already sent ten

thousand soldiers northward to reinforce Vassarfall.

“It may be the most appropriate place to attack. Though deciding to attack Vassar... Poor bastards,” Nobunaga said and chuckled with a malicious grin.

No doubt the Steel Clan wanted to avoid the pincer movement being orchestrated by the western and eastern army reinforcements at all costs. They would try to take down Vassarfall’s northern army as quickly as possible. As a result of that choice, they had put themselves against the worst opponent. In the Flame Clan Army, Vassarfall was known as the “Master of Advance and Retreat,” and though he was good at advance, being an excellent commander of the vanguard, he was even better at fighting retreats and other forms of defensive fighting.

“Hah, very true.”

“Big Brother Vassarfall has that special card up his sleeve, after all.”

“Indeed, even Suoh Yuuto won’t be able to defeat that.”

The generals spoke their piece and nodded to one another in agreement. They clearly understood what Nobunaga meant. They, too, were well aware of Vassarfall’s strength. He had served as their shield countless times.

“Don’t underestimate our opponent too much. He’s a man who conquered half of Yggdrasil in a single reign. Even Vassar likely won’t last too long against him. We must move immediately. It’s time to finish off the Steel Clan!” Nobunaga exclaimed.

“Yes, My Lord!” the generals said in unison and stood at attention. The main body of the Flame Clan in the south began its move northward.

“We still can’t get through...?”

Thír was unable to hide her irritation as her forces struggled to break through the Flame Clan formation. They were now facing the enemy’s fourth line of defense. Her forces were clearly struggling to push through. It wasn’t because the enemy was stronger than the previous lines of defense. It was simply because they had lost some of their momentum. Even Einherjar were still only human. They, like any other soldier, grew tired from constant fighting, and their

movements became more sluggish. They had run out of ammunition and tetsuhaus, and there was no time to resupply.

“Perhaps I should have held more in reserve. No. That would have been unwise,” Thír muttered to herself.

Deploying one’s forces in a trickle was a foolish tactic. This battle was a race against time. If she had kept any portion of her forces in reserve over concerns about having them available later, her men might not have even broken through the enemy’s second line of defense. It was possible they would have struggled against Hyuuga and lost their momentum entirely. More importantly, in an emergency, the Maidens of the Waves had one final trump card up their sleeve. An ultimate ability that would remove all of their fatigue if necessary.

“Hm?”

Thír suddenly felt a rush of strength bubbling up from her core. It was a strange phenomenon, but it was a familiar feeling for her.

“Ah, His Majesty has ordered the use of Gjallarhorn. His sense of timing is impressive as always,” she said smugly as she curled her lips in a grin. Thír had been on the verge of requesting its use over the radio. Although Yuuto was at the rear of the army, he had read the flow of the battle better than Thír and taken the necessary steps before she could ask for them. While he had been an incredibly difficult opponent as an enemy, there was nothing more reassuring than having him in command as an ally.

“Right then! Men, unleash the surprise!” she ordered.

“Err?! Really?! Are you sure there’s any meaning to doing it?” her second-in-command responded as he raised his brow skeptically at Thír’s command.

She understood where he was coming from. The objects they were supposed to throw didn’t seem like they’d be much use. If anything, they might get better results from just throwing rocks. That was fine, though. They appeared like something entirely different from what they actually were.

“You feel it as well, don’t you?! The ásmegin from Gjallarhorn! There’s no better time to make use of it!” Thír stated.

“U-Understood, ma’am!”

“Let loose!”

The orders echoed through the Steel Clan lines, and they began throwing urns at the Flame Clan formation. They were simple earthenware urns. There was nothing contained within them. However...

“By the gods!”

“Explosives!”

“All units, take cover!”

The Flame Clan soldiers hurriedly tried to avoid the oncoming urns in a panic. They believed the simple urns were tetsuhaus. That was understandable. After all, the Steel Clan had repeatedly employed tetsuhaus against the Flame Clan’s ranks. Thír had heard that they had even been employed in suicide attacks during the retreat from Gjallarbrú Fortress. The Flame Clan’s soldiers had been conditioned to fear the weapons.

This had been the plan Hveðrungr had proposed to Yuuto during their war council. There was an endless supply of empty urns sitting in the abandoned houses of Glaðsheimr. They would be able to make the enemy scatter without using a single grain of precious gunpowder. It was an environmentally friendly tactic that employed the deep understanding of human psychology that made Hveðrungr such an effective tactician. Of course, they were still simply empty urns. The enemy would immediately see that they didn’t explode. They only shrank back for a moment before they realized they’d been duped. That moment was more than enough, however.

“Now! All of you, follow me! Now is the time! Break the enemy with all of your strength!”

Thír held up her sword and urged on her soldiers, charging into the enemy ranks and cutting down enemy after enemy. The soldiers who followed in her wake no longer showed the haggard expressions they had a moment before; instead, their eyes burned with a fiery battle lust, and the men fought with an intensity that, by all accounts, would lead any observer to believe that the battle had just started.

Gjallarhorn, the Call to War. It was a rune that turned allied soldiers into

berserkers who didn't fear death and weren't affected by fatigue. The rune was so powerful that it had been known as the Rune of Kings. By utilizing its savage power, the struggle from earlier seemed like a distant dream as they scythed through the enemy ranks. Again and again, they cut down the enemies before them. At long last, they broke through the fourth formation.

"This is... Impossible..."

However, what awaited them beyond that fourth rank was not the enemy's commander and his forces, but a fifth formation of defenders.

"They've broken through the fourth layer as well? That's quite a bit faster than expected. The Steel Clan truly does possess some impressive fighters."

Deep within the Flame Clan formation, Vassarfall let out a tired chuckle—a chuckle that also showed he still had some confidence in his own position. That was only natural though, given what his men were currently preparing under his orders.

"How's the sixth layer coming?" Vassarfall asked one of his generals.

"They're currently mustering," the man replied.

Unbeknownst to the Steel Clan, Vassarfall's unit still had walls remaining. The tactic he was currently employing was known as the Infinite Spiral Formation—a name Vassarfall himself had come up with. While the Flame Clan was now known as a great power in Yggdrasil that boasted overwhelming military numbers, until just two years ago, they had done their best to avoid agitating their neighboring clans and had been focused on defending their territory in Múspelheim until their preparations had been complete. This formation was what he had used during that time, and it had achieved amazing results in every deployment.

The key to this formation's success was to take the soldiers who retreated from the rear of a broken defensive formation and immediately reorganize them into a new wall. Ordinarily, it was foolish to employ forces in succession rather than all at once. That was because separating the forces into layers made each of those layers weaker and vastly increased the probability of the army as a whole being completely routed. However, if the goal of their redeployment

was restricted simply to keeping the enemy occupied, Vassarfall believed there was no formation that was more effective.

The enemy was forced to slow when it clashed with the next defensive layer. On top of that, if they kept running into additional walls of enemies, it was possible to sap the enemy's morale by making them feel as though they were fighting against an army of infinite numbers. Vassarfall had been given the title Master of Advance and Retreat out of gratitude when he had employed this formation to save the lives of countless members of the Flame Clan Army.

"We're having some trouble gathering our soldiers back up after they retreat. It doesn't look like we'll be able to form a seventh wall," the general informed him, continuing his report.

"That makes sense, I suppose. There's a bunch of them who were conscripted only recently," Vassarfall responded as he scratched at his head with a sigh. The career soldiers in the northern army numbered roughly nine thousand. The remaining ten thousand men were conscripted farmers who had been summoned for this war—virtual amateurs who had gotten, at most, a month of training before being sent to war.

"It is as you say, sir. We gave strict orders that they follow the guidance of the trained soldiers, but..."

"Well, sure, the ones that'll run will run anyway. Not a problem. I'd already accounted for that in my calculations," Vassarfall said coldly without much interest. He believed that the greatest weakness of his formation was that it was too perfect. Truly wonderful, sublime things were often beyond comprehension to mundane minds. The conscripts, having seen the enemy break their lines and push in, had been caught up in what they immediately saw before them and ran in a panic. It was a lamentable limitation.

"It appears that the enemy's momentum has increased immensely. If nothing changes, even the fifth layer won't last long," Fluss said with a tense expression. His observation was correct, but that was something Vassarfall had already accounted for before the battle had even begun.

"It's probably Gjallarhorn, the rune of the Sword Clan patriarch Fagrahvél. That, too, isn't a problem. The rune's duration is short; its purpose is to create

decisive victories. It won't last long," Vassarfall replied calmly.

"I see..."

"Heh heh. Let's just have them waste that power against our fifth layer," Vassarfall said with a confident chuckle. The enemy was now caught in a spider's web, a trap where the more they struggled, the more they sapped their own strength. They were far too committed at this point. Surely they were trapped.

"Now, all that's left is to wait for reinforcements," Vassarfall stated.

There was no need for him to deliver the coup de grâce. It was a bit irritating that he had to let someone else claim the enemy leader's head, particularly given that Vassarfall wasn't fond of either the western or eastern army commanders. There was nothing to be done about it though. He wrote it off to the whims of fate.

"I'm sure the Great Lord will understand," Vassarfall murmured with conviction.

Nobunaga was a man who acknowledged and properly appreciated the importance of plain or unflashy work. That was why men like Kuuga and himself were counted among the Five Division Commanders. For this reason, Vassarfall was confident that Nobunaga would properly appreciate his efforts this time as well. He chose to believe that and simply continued to do his job. While the battle was proceeding as Vassarfall had intended, he was still facing an enemy he couldn't afford to underestimate.

"Tch. This guy's like gum that's stuck on the bottom of your shoes," Yuuto spat out the words with an irritated click of his tongue. He wanted to end this battle as quickly as possible, and as if to spite him, the enemy force simply presented him with another layer of soldiers each time they broke through one. They were facing a supremely troublesome opponent. Of course, that was perhaps one of the greatest compliments he could pay to his current enemy.

"How are they even managing this? They should only have twenty thousand men or so. It feels like we're fighting twice that number," Felicia said, furrowing her brow. Her voice was tinged with worry. Yuuto understood how she felt. He

would be lying if he said he had no worries about how long it would take to reach the enemy's command formation or whether they could even win this battle before reinforcements arrived. However, it was a commander's job to not let those sorts of things show on his face.

"They've probably been ordered to retreat and regroup once their line is broken. They're taking those retreating soldiers and reorganizing them into a new defensive formation. Meanwhile, the command company is pulling backward. It's defense in depth," Yuuto explained. He made sure to name the enemy's tactics so that those around him were aware he knew what was happening. That was because that awareness alone was enough to provide reassurance.

"That's the first time I've heard that term," Felicia said and pouted slightly. She was his adjutant, and she was responsible for connecting and communicating between Yuuto to other members of the army, meaning that she was aware of most military matters that Yuuto dealt with. She was probably displeased that there was a tactic that she hadn't been informed about.

"I had no intention of using the tactic myself, and I never expected someone to pull it on me," Yuuto replied with a shrug of his shoulders, insisting on his own innocence.

"What do you mean?" Felicia asked.

"Ordinarily, the point of defense is to keep the enemy from breaking through, and you do that by stopping their advance. This, however, is a defensive tactic that's meant to work by slowing the enemy's advance rather than stopping it," Yuuto responded.

"It certainly sounds like a useful tactic depending on the situation," Felicia stated.

"In concept, it's close to the Ox-Yoke Formation that we used against Steinþórr. It's quite a bit more complex to execute in practice, however. It's not something that can be learned overnight. It requires a lot of arrangements, and those need to be communicated, if not to the line soldiers, then at least to unit commanders, and they need to understand precisely how it works to be able to pull it off reliably enough for it to be useful," Yuuto explained.

“Ah, that’s quite a bit of work.”

“It is. The biggest problem is that it’s predicated on having your defensive lines being broken down.”

“It’s difficult enough to simply maintain morale when that’s happening...”

“Exactly.”

The average soldier was extremely sensitive to the flow of a battle. If they see their side is at a disadvantage, they often just run, which sets off a chain reaction of panic. The strategy in question required a force to allow the enemy to keep breaking through their defensive lines as their men retreated slowly in tandem with their command staff, all the while reassuring the soldiers that everything is perfectly fine so that they’ll continue to move as instructed. This wasn’t something that could be done on the fly. It was impossible to accomplish without properly educating and training the soldiers far in advance.

“It’s a tactic that only the Flame Clan, who created a standing professional army from the very start, can pull off,” Yuuto stated.

They probably spent quite a bit of time drilling for just this tactic. Or at the very least, there were quite a few among the enemy’s ranks who had prior experience in pulling off this tactic. The Flame Clan had conducted a mass levee, doubling their numbers through conscription just before this war. Without veteran soldiers to lead the conscripts, they wouldn’t have been able to execute this tactic so well.

“Lady Fagrahvél is nearing her limit. Is there nothing more we can do?”

“Even if they’re slowly pulling back as they reform their defensive lines, they won’t be able to create defensive walls forever. If we keep breaking through their lines, we’ll eventually reach their main body. That said, continuing like this is still risky.”

The layers of defenses killed his army’s momentum and also sapped it of strength. The fact of the matter was that Erna and Hrönn had been knocked out of the battle. He’d also received reports that the other Maidens of the Waves had been forced to withdraw due to fatigue. Gjallarhorn wouldn’t last much longer either.

“For what it’s worth, we’ll be just fine,” Yuuto said casually, as though he hadn’t a care in the world.

“You have a secret plan up your sleeve, don’t you?” Felicia asked and smiled as though she had been let in on a secret. Suoh Yuuto was a man who always took extreme care in his preparations. If he was this confident, then he must have something already prepared. This time was different, however. He slowly shook his head in response.

“No, I don’t,” he replied.

“Oh?!”

Felicia let out a note of surprise at the unexpected reply.

“I do have faith, though...”

“Huh? Wha...?!”

Felicia’s confusion deepened and she blinked. It wasn’t the sort of statement Yuuto ordinarily made. Yuuto watched her and burst out laughing, unable to contain his amusement. “The Flame Clan forces aren’t the only ones waiting for reinforcements. They should be close by now, right? She’s probably caught the scent. You have, haven’t you, Rún?”

“Wow, they’re really fighting!” Hildegard remarked loudly.

“I read it right,” Sigrún stated as her lips curled faintly into a bright smile. When Glaðsheimr had gone up in flames, she had panicked and had fought the urge to charge in to join Yuuto. What came next convinced her to stay her hand, however...

“It smells like alcohol. Also, what’s this awful smell? Urgh, I feel sick,” Hildegard complained.

Hildegard’s words had quickly calmed her down. Hildegard’s nose was exceptionally sharp. Although Sigrún hadn’t been able to detect the same scents, she had faith that if Hildegard smelled it, then it was most certainly there. Alcohol, some other different, terrible smell, and fire. Those three factors pointed to a single answer: the fires had been set not by the Flame Clan, but by

Yuuto in an attempt to draw the enemy into Glaðsheimr proper, to then destroy them with an even fiercer fire.

Contemplating all this, Sigrún had begun to think of what would come next. Once he had the enemy fall for his trap, Yuuto wouldn't simply sit around. That was particularly true since the Flame Clan still had a large army arrayed around Glaðsheimr's walls. Then which direction would he go? North, South, East, or West?

That, too, was an easy question to answer. The flames were raging in the south. Even Yuuto wouldn't be able to get an army through that raging inferno. If anything, that fire was a wall that kept the enemy out.

Then would he head east in the hope of escape? No, that wasn't it either. While news of their arrival had been intercepted by the Flame Clan, Yuuto was already aware that Sigrún had defeated Shiba. After all, Linnea had received a reply to that report. In which case, Yuuto would use this opportunity to inflict losses on the enemy while also joining with their forces. That would eliminate the east, which was furthest from the Bifröst region, leaving only the west and the north.

Between those two choices, north was the only sensible choice. The north was the furthest from Nobunaga's main body to the south, and there was a gentle downward slope, making it ideal for an attack.

All that remained for Sigrún and her forces was to head in that direction at full speed. The smell of crude oil that wafted in the air like a strange type of beacon only strengthened her conviction. While she would ordinarily have pinched her nose at the smell, today, she found it a more pleasant smell than any perfume. After some time marching, the battlefield where the two clans' armies clashed was now spread out in front of their eyes.

"As I hear of the Steel Clan managing to break through our sixth layer of defenses, I'm reminded of the power of a raging river," Vassarfall said and let out a long sigh. By his calculations, they should have been able to stop the enemy around the fourth layer. He hadn't imagined they'd make it through the sixth layer. Still, while it was a bit of a make-shift formation, the seventh layer

had already been assembled. It really had been quite the close call.

“This should last us a bit longer. Besides, Gjallarhorn appears to have run its course,” Vassarfall stated as he smiled widely.

The Steel Clan Army’s momentum had evaporated, as though their previous strength had been an illusion. They were struggling against the improvised and fragile seventh line of defense. The various Einherjar who had gone on a rampage on the front lines and inspired the Steel Clan’s soldiers must have been totally exhausted by now—they weren’t showing the same invincibility they had at the start of the battle. The enemy was no longer firing projectiles like arrows and tetsuhaus at them either. They were out of reserves.

Of course, with a little time, the numerous Steel Clan Einherjar would return to the front line, and the soldiers resting at the rear would probably regain their strength. They would eventually get fresh supplies from Glaðsheimr as well. However, the Flame Clan reinforcements would most definitely arrive before any of those things happened.

“Somehow managed to win—Hm?! ”

It was at the exact moment he was convinced of his victory that his ears caught an impossible sound.

“The sound of a group of horses?! Could it be the Múspell Unit?! ”

Even Vassarfall doubted what his own ears told him. But, how? They had made sure to close off any lines of communication between the main Steel Clan Army and the Múspells. Despite those efforts, however, this was clearly a coordinated movement between the two forces.

“They’ve caught us from behind. Tch, we’re in trouble.”

All confidence drained from Vassarfall’s face. That, too, was understandable. The Infinite Spiral Formation—although in reality, it was finite rather than infinite—focused most of an army’s forces to the front, leaving practically nothing behind the command company. The formation left the army completely defenseless from an enemy attack from behind.

“Fluss! Send the eighth layer behind the command company!”

“Whaa?! But that line is barely assembled!”

“That’s fine! Just hurry!”

“U-Understood!”

Fluss hurriedly sent a messenger with the orders. However...

“Gah!”

“Urgh!”

“It’s the enemy! The Steel Clan is attacking!”

Before the breakaway layer could arrive, the Steel Clan’s cavalry poured into the command company. Because it was the command company, it was protected by the most elite warriors of the Third Division, but they put up little resistance. The defenders were cut down one after the other.

“Blast. This is a loss! Everyone! Retreaaaat!”

Vassarfall immediately concluded that the jig was up and began to run himself. Staying and putting his life on the line to fight wasn’t an option for him. This failure would probably mean he’d lose his position as a division commander, but so long as he was alive, he could always recover. What mattered now was survival. His ability to switch tracks so quickly was a sign of his intelligence and ability as a leader.

“Hah! Found you! Prepare to die!”

His orders must have tipped off the enemy, as one of the cavalry charged at Vassarfall and attacked him with her lance.

“Whooa!”

Vassarfall jumped out of the way with great agility and managed to avoid the blow. The enemy that had targeted him was a pig-tailed girl that looked barely old enough to even hold a spear. However, the strength behind her attack was far beyond anything a girl her age ought to be capable of. Vassarfall effortlessly avoided the barrage of deadly thrusts that were directed at him. Other enemy troopers noticed his presence and they turned to attack him, but Vassarfall easily avoided their attacks and began to flee.

“Wait!”

“Stay and fight!”

“The enemy general’s making a run for it! After him!”

Of course, the enemy troopers gave chase, but—

“Wha?!”

“Ugh!”

“Get out of the way!”

He opened the distance with his well-trained legs. The reason he had shouted out the order to retreat and let the enemy know he was the commander had been to draw their forces to him and try to allow his subordinates to flee, but Vassarfall wasn’t the type to go so far as to sacrifice his own safety in the process. He had only done so because he was confident he could escape.

He had originally come from a family of spies. He was considered to be the family’s greatest product. His physical abilities, too, were extraordinary. Not that it was enough to outrun cavalry horses, but friend and foe were engaged in a pitched melee. Horses weren’t able to simply chase in a straight line without running into another combatant.

By contrast, Vassarfall was able to smoothly weave his way through the throng like a snake slithering across the ground. The nickname of Fafnir, the Immortal Imp, which he had acquired by not suffering so much as a scratch in his ten years of service to the Flame Clan, was well deserved. If he could just get to the forest—

“Whooooa!”

A spear hurtled toward the space Vassarfall had occupied a mere moment before, piercing the ground as though it had been planted there. Had it hit him, there would be a huge hole in his body.

“Tch. It’s hard to aim properly with my left arm.”

The wind carried a cool, beautiful voice—one that was out of place on the battlefield—to his ears. The first thing Vassarfall saw when he turned around was silver hair that shimmered like cold steel. He knew at a single glance. She

was the war maiden Sigrún, the greatest fighter in the Steel Clan, and the warrior who had slain the absurdly skilled Shiba. She was the one person he wanted to avoid at all costs. He needed to get away as quickly as possible. However, he stopped in mid-stride.

“Can’t be too picky when I’m not in peak condition. Come, face me!”

Sigrún drew the sword from her hip, spurring her horse and charging at Vassarfall. He did nothing to fight or to flee, instead simply standing there and taking her blade to his body. It had happened so smoothly and so quickly that Sigrún, who had cut him down, was caught by surprise. As he collapsed, Vassarfall murmured with a satisfied smile.

“Sublime...”

That was the last word he ever uttered.

“Sieg lárn!”

“Sieg þjóðann!”

The joyful shouts of the soldiers rang out from the front lines. It seemed they had won something of significance. The radio Yuuto was holding suddenly burst out in static.

“Your Majesty! Lady Sigrún’s Múspell Unit arrived and slew the enemy general Vassarfall!”

“Ah! Good! She did it!”

Upon hearing Thír’s report, Yuuto broke his stoic facade and let out a whoop of joy.

“I see, so you were counting on Rún... But you hadn’t contacted her, right?” Felicia asked.

She nodded as though she had figured it out, but now she was puzzled by another question. Almost all of the orders Yuuto issued were carried out through her. She had no recollection of receiving a message or sending a message to Sigrún. That was, of course, because Yuuto hadn’t done either of those things.

“I hadn’t, no,” Yuuto replied.

“Then how did...?”

“Like I said. I have faith in her,” Yuuto said casually.

He hadn’t received any news of their arrival, nor had he issued any orders. It hadn’t been a result of any sort of plan, it had been a hope and a prayer. As a ruler, he knew it wasn’t the sort of gamble he should take, particularly since so many lives depended upon his judgment. Yuuto had been convinced that she would arrive, however. Even without a message to that effect, based on Sigrún’s personality, he knew that she would be near Glaðsheimr—that she would see the signs Yuuto had left for her to follow.

He and Sigrún had shared four years of hardship and joys, and they’d experienced many life-and-death situations. Yuuto knew that she would fulfill his expectations. It was all as he had hoped for, including the fact that she had arrived with the best possible gift in tow.

“She’s a wonderful daughter, far more than I deserve,” Yuuto stated proudly.

Yuuto couldn’t help but thank the gods that she had been a member of the Wolf Clan. Without her, it was possible that they would have lost one of their wars, the clan would have been destroyed, and Yuuto himself would be a corpse. Sigrún was a goddess of victory, both for Yuuto and for the Steel Clan itself.

“Guess I don’t have time to be reveling,” he remarked, centering himself. This was still a battlefield, after all. While the Flame Clan Army’s Third Division, the force they had been fighting until several minutes ago, had fallen into disarray and started its retreat after losing Vassarfall, its commander, the Flame Clan’s western and eastern armies along with the main force to the south remained intact and were heading toward them. If they caught him in a pincer, the Steel Clan forces would be annihilated. The Steel Clan’s units had accomplished their objective. It was past time to get out while they could.

“We’ll be returning to Glaðsheimr—in *triumph* no less!”

“Sieg lárn!”

The cheers of the Steel Clan soldiers echoed across the plains around the city.

And so, the Battle of Northern Glaðsheimr ended in a victory for the Steel Clan.

“...I see. Vassar has fallen. A pity to lose such a man,” Nobunaga closed his eyes and murmured the words, placing his hand against his right breast and nodding in respectful salute.

While Vassarfall had been an eccentric man, Nobunaga himself had been a bit of an eccentric in his youth and had felt a certain kinship with the fallen general. He had also liked the fact that Vassarfall was not afraid to stand up to him, and that he didn't shy away from arguing his points if he truly believed them to be right. There had been times he had found the man's long soliloquies irritating, and now that he knew he would never hear them again, he found himself thinking back wistfully about them. Although Nobunaga was ruthless to the extreme when it came to his enemies, for those he was close to, he was, if anything, an extremely compassionate and loving man. He wanted to linger in sentimentality for a while longer, but as the supreme commander of an army like the Flame Clan's, he didn't have that luxury.

“What is the situation in the north?” Nobunaga asked one of his scouts.

“It appears the Steel Clan Army has already retreated into Glaðsheimr. The northern army that had been anchored by the Third Division has fled the field. Currently, the eastern and western armies are taking in survivors, but it seems a great number of them have deserted.”

“Right...”

That was all Nobunaga murmured before he let out a deep, long sigh. The main force in the south had lost several thousand to the fires, as well as a large number of their rather valuable cannons. In stark contrast, they hadn't been able to take anything from the enemy. This whole series of battles had been a set of brutal losses for Nobunaga. That wasn't the end of his woes, however. Bad news tended to come in groups, after all.

“My Great Lord! The Second...!”

“Ah?! What's happened to Ran?!” Nobunaga exclaimed in a panicked frenzy.

“H-His condition suddenly worsened... I-I'm told he just passed!”

“What?!”

Nobunaga stood there in shocked silence. The news hit him far harder than word of Vassarfall’s death. Despite his brilliant mind, Nobunaga hadn’t been able to understand what he had just been told. But as the realization dawned on him, his body began to tremble in rage.

“How can that be?!”

He grabbed the collar of his bodyguard and roared in anger. A wet stain appeared on the bodyguard’s trousers as an effect of the sheer intensity of Nobunaga’s rage. But if Nobunaga had noticed, he made no sign of it.

“I had been told he was stable. Was that a lie?!”

He lifted the bodyguard from the ground and held him aloft by his collar. It was a strength that was unbelievable for a man well past his sixtieth year.

“A-As I said, h-his condition suddenly deteriorated...”

“Gods damn you! You’re of no use to me! Call the healer! No, I’ll head there myself!”

Nobunaga roughly threw the bodyguard to the side and hurriedly stalked off to the tent Ran had been recuperating in. He then forcefully threw open the tent flap and barged inside.

“L-Lord Patriarch?!” a man who appeared to be the healer said with all of the color drained from his features. His body was also trembling. Nobunaga’s overflowing rage was just that intimidating.

“Why did you kill Ran?!” Nobunaga asked, his face practically contorted in anger.

“Kill?! N-No! I-I did my best, I did everything I could as I treated him!” the healer protested.

“I was told he was able to talk and that he was conscious! How does that lead to death?!” Nobunaga screamed in blind fury.

“I-It is common for those who suffer terrible burns to be fine for several days but then suddenly deteriorate and pass away...”

That was deeply rooted in fact. When the human body suffered widespread burns, the body quickly lost moisture through the burned tissue, causing dehydration, which made it easier for the body to go into shock. Furthermore, it was common enough for bacteria to infect the burned skin and cause sepsis. Therefore those who survived being badly burned often died of other conditions caused by the burns. Of course, Nobunaga himself had used fire as a weapon countless times and had others use it on him. He knew what the healer said was true. He knew that, but still...

“Silence!” he yelled.

With that, Nobunaga drew his sword from his hip and cut down the healer. Nobunaga was, in the end, only human. Even he couldn’t easily accept the death of a man he had valued as much as one of his own children. It was understandable that his rage was vented at the healer who had failed to save Ran.

“Urr—Urk...”

The healer collapsed as though he was curling into a ball. Nobunaga showed no sign of acknowledging the healer’s death, coolly walking past him to where Ran’s body lay, plopping down in front of the corpse.

Ran’s expression was calm and serene in death. He looked as though he was still alive. Nobunaga lightly placed his hand over Ran’s mouth. But there was no sign of breath. He couldn’t bring himself to believe it, and he placed his hand on Ran’s chest. But there was no pulse. Ran was, in fact, dead. By touching him, Nobunaga was forced to admit and accept that reality.

“You disloyal fool!”

Those were the first words out of Nobunaga’s mouth. They were not words that ought to have been directed to the dead. But he was the man who had thrown ashes at his own father’s mortuary tablet, demanding to know why he had died so early. Nobunaga’s state of mind was similar to what he had experienced then.

“I told you, didn’t I? You needed to live, whatever it took, so you could be there to support Homura.”

It had been just a few days ago that he had asked that favor of Ran. Ran was a man who always followed Nobunaga's orders. He had followed even the smallest and most inconsequential of orders. He had never disobeyed Nobunaga in their long acquaintance. For him to disobey Nobunaga's words twice in succession when it most mattered was something Nobunaga couldn't forgive.

"Prig. Blockhead. Miser. Ninny. Halfwit. Simpleton. Fool. Yes, you're a fool. You may have a sharp mind, but you're still a fool. Idiot. Imbecile."

He poured every insult he could think of on Ran. He continued for a while, and when he began to repeat the first insults...

"Please forgive me..." Nobunaga softly uttered an apology. His voice was filled with regret. "A part of me had realized I was wrong. I came to realize that the one who is right—the one who has justice on his side—is the Steel Clan lad."

He was referring to the story of Yggdrasil sinking into the sea that Yuuto had told him at their conference at Stórk. At the time, he hadn't believed it. It was dangerous for the head of a clan to take the words of the head of another clan at face value. But Suoh Yuuto had, in fact, moved his people—in the hundreds of thousands for that matter. No, perhaps even in their millions by now. Although Yuuto had conquered half of Yggdrasil, he was willing to let go of all of it. This either meant he was so mad that he couldn't distinguish reality from his delusions, or that he truly believed that Yggdrasil was going to sink into the ocean.

Based on how he fought, Suoh Yuuto was clearly in control of his faculties, and he was able to clearly face reality. Bearing that in mind, there was only one answer. His words were the truth. As though to back his words, there had been frequent massive earthquakes across the continent.

"But even then, I couldn't stop. For fifty years, I had dreamed of conquering the known world and put everything behind that effort. How could I stop now?" Nobunaga muttered.

A mere fifty years, but how long those fifty years were. While it may be an instant for gods and immortals, to a human, it was a lifetime. He couldn't simply abandon the one thing he had spent that time pursuing, the thing he had given

everything to achieve. How could he do so? It was in front of him, just waiting to be taken.

“No, I shouldn’t have let it faze me. When I can’t believe my path is righteous, I subconsciously relax my grip. I don’t step in as far as I should,” he continued.

Nobunaga himself hadn’t intentionally held back. He believed he had done all that he could to conquer Yggdrasil. But now that he thought back on his campaigns, he began to see where he had not been as ruthless as he could have been.

He had been fixated on winning with the mandate of heaven, to win in a fairly fought battle. He had spent four battles trying to win through conventional measures. It was true that a conqueror needed to do so in a creditable way, to maintain a certain reputation. That was true, but there was still more he could have done. Had he been himself, he believed he could have done so. The difference had been small, so small that he hadn’t realized it until now.

However, Nobunaga knew that tiny difference, the thinnest sliver, often made the difference in battle. He had seen those with great ability lose and fall because of their emotions, their hearts. Suoh Yuuto, though young, was a worthy opponent, a man who was equal to the powerful rivals Nobunaga had faced in his life. How could he defeat such an enemy while he was subconsciously holding back?

“I suppose I wanted that boy to stop me...” Nobunaga admitted to himself.

There was no way for him to stop himself. That wasn’t a choice available to him. But he was well aware that he was wrong. That was why he had subconsciously wanted that boy to take the full weight of his effort and break it. Yes, a part of him had wanted to fight a fair fight and lose. It would be a worthy way to die if he were to perish while doing everything in his power to achieve his dream. No wonder he couldn’t push through a victory—no wonder he lost this time. He had always been trying to lose.

“And the end result is this... I killed you. My sentimentality. My weakness. I can’t ask you to forgive me... I truly am sorry,” Nobunaga said and bowed his head deeply to Ran’s body. The words weren’t simply directed at Ran. They were also directed to Ran’s father, Mori Yoshinari. Despite having sworn to care

for the orphaned children of the loyal retainer who had protected his back at the cost of his life, he had, in the end, ended up getting most of them killed young. There was no way he could face them if he went to the afterlife.

“‘I haven’t seen you conquer the world yet,’ huh?”

Those were the last words Nobunaga had heard from Ran. He could still clearly replay them in his mind.

“Is that what you desire? What your whole family desires?” Nobunaga asked. There was, of course, no reply. Now that he thought about it, the last words Yoshinari had sent Nobunaga were that he complete his conquests. Nobunaga never took what other people said at face value. People were quick to lie, and they often pretended whatever was most convenient to them on the surface. At the same time, he knew from experience that the things people say when cornered are what they truly believe. It hadn’t been flattery that had driven the two Mori men to tell Nobunaga to conquer the world. They had truly meant it.

“Then I shall make certain your wishes come true,” Nobunaga stated clearly.

Was he in the right? Would it be for the betterment of the people? It was because he had worried about such things that he made mistakes. No, at this point, those concerns didn’t matter. He could think about those things once everything was over. No, what he had to do was focus on the battle in front of him. After all, this was a battle to avenge them.

“Ran, I will avenge you.”

The figure that stood up was not a man, but a demon. The compassionate ruler who had affected countless reforms for the sake of the people and improved the lives of his subjects was no longer here. All that remained was a ruthless demon who was driven solely by vengeance. That, too, was one of Nobunaga’s faces.

To be continued...



Afterword

Editor: “So, the war is going to end with volume 20, right?”

Takayama: “That’s the plan, yes.”

Editor: “You know, there’s no way this is going to end in a single volume.”

Takayama: “I intend to end it no matter what. Even if the volume goes over 300 pages, I intend to end it here. Twenty volumes is a good place to call it quits too.”

Editor: “I see. Well, please let me know as quickly as possible if it doesn’t look like it’ll happen. There’s the whole matter of illustrations, after all.”

“That blasted editor! He clearly thinks I’m not going to finish it! I’ll end it no matter what! I’m totally going to end it with this volume!”

A Few Weeks Later...

Takayama: “My apologies. It doesn’t look like it’s going to end, even with over 300 pages.”

Editor: “Ha ha! Just as I expected.”

And so, the main story is going to continue, it seems.

No, I really don’t have any intention of letting it drag on. It’s not my intention to water down this series by letting it meander on. It’s just that as I kept writing segments that were necessary to the story, it just kept ballooning.

I think some of that’s due to the fact that I started figuring out how to properly write characters around volume 14. Light novels are character novels, so it’s a good thing to get better at depicting characters, but unfortunately, it’s made it completely impossible to figure out the page count.

Novels are a hard thing to get right.

So, I may have left this until last, but as always, thank you to all the people who were involved with the production of this volume, starting with my editor,

the illustrator Yukisan-sensei, and, of course, the greatest thanks to you, the reader, for picking up this volume. I look forward to sharing more adventures with you this year.

Seiichi Takayama

Bonus Short Story

Siblings During Better Days...

The following incident took place three years before Yuuto's arrival in Íárnviðr, back when Hveðrungr still went by the name of Loptr...

As Loptr was returning home from the palace, his younger sister Felicia ran excitedly toward him, turning around and brushing aside her hair to show her back to him. "Brother, brother, look!" she exclaimed. There was something attractive about a woman pushing aside her hair and revealing the nape of her neck, but what drew Loptr's eye was something else entirely.

"...A rune, hm? I see it's manifested in you as well," Loptr replied with a tone of disappointment. One of his greatest fears had come to pass.

"...You're not going to congratulate me? If anything, you seem upset by the news," Felicia said to him, her expression darkening,

"She picked up on my true emotions... Seems I still have a long way to go..." Loptr thought to himself bitterly.

From a young age, Loptr's father had drilled a particularly important lesson into him—never let others see your true feelings. Loptr knew he had gotten quite good at hiding his emotions from most others, but Felicia, being his younger sister, knew him all too well. She picked up on his disappointment through subtle nuances in his body language. Of course, there was no problem with family members being able to see through his mask.

"As a member of the Wolf Clan, of course I'm pleased. Any and all Einherjar are clan treasures. That said, as your older brother, I'm somewhat conflicted..." Loptr admitted with a thin smile. Ordinarily, women weren't sent to the battlefield, but Einherjar like Sigrún who possessed exceptional combat abilities were the notable exception.

"As your brother, I would have preferred that you, at least, could live

peacefully,” Loptr said.

“Given the danger our clan is in, that’s hardly appropriate. Surely we need every warrior we can spare,” Felicia replied.

“Well, I suppose that’s true...” Loptr conceded.

“Besides, you have a dangerous tendency to let your guard down at the worst moments. I guess you let your attention wander. I’m worried that’ll cost you your life on the battlefield someday. I’ll make sure to keep you safe!” Felicia stated proudly, bumping her fist against her chest.

No doubt having her rune manifest had given her a great measure of confidence. Such behavior was rather unusual for her. Loptr wasn’t able to hold back a chuckle.

“Hah! By you? I hope I never fall that far,” Loptr said through thinly-veiled laughter.

“What’s that supposed to mean?!” Felicia yelled back.

“An older brother, being protected by his little sister is embarrassing. If anything, I’ll be the one who protects you,” Loptr replied.

“No, I’ll protect you! I mean it!” Felicia insisted as she puffed out her cheeks in a pout.

Back then, they were still close as siblings could be...



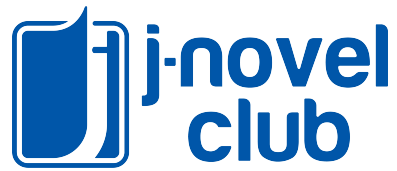






Table of Contents

- [Cover](#)
- [Color Illustrations](#)
- [Character Introduction](#)
- [PROLOGUE](#)
- [PROLOGUE II](#)
- [ACT 1](#)
- [ACT 2](#)
- [ACT 3](#)
- [ACT 4](#)
- [Afterword](#)
- [Bonus Short Story](#)
- [Bonus Textless Images](#)
- [About J-Novel Club](#)
- [Copyright](#)



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The Master of Ragnarok & Blesser of Einherjar: Volume 20

by Seiichi Takayama

Translated by Noboru Akimoto Edited by Aaron Brown

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